

DIAMOND DICK JR.

THE BOYS BEST WEEKLY

Issued Weekly—By Subscription, \$2.50 per year. Entered as Second Class Matter at the N. Y. Post Office by STREET & SMITH

No. 130.

Price Five Cents.

DIAMOND DICK'S DRAG NET

BY W. B. LAWSON.



"TWENTY YARDS FURTHER AND WE ARE SAVED—SAVED TO LIFE AND VENGEANCE."

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No. 130.

NEW YORK, April 8, 1899.

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Diamond Dick's Drag-Net

OR,

THE KILLERS OF KOOTENAI

By W. B. LAWSON

CHAPTER I.

AN OLD EXPRESS PACKAGE.

The afternoon of a lowering September day, in the north Idaho mountain wilderness, of a year or two ago, and the interior of a train of cars flying southwestward over that section or branch of the North Pacific Railroad, connecting with Spokane Falls from the East.

In a seat to herself sat a sweet-faced, lady-like little girl, to whom the conductor and brakeman invariably gave an encouraging smile in passing, and who was also an object of smiling curiosity on the part of her dozen or more fellow passengers in the car, all of them of the sterner sex.

"Coeur d'Alene Junction!" was presently announced, as the train came to a stop, only to quickly pull out again, with the addition of one way passenger.

This passenger was a rosy-cheeked, sandy-haired countryman, with a very honest, cheerful expression of countenance, and something suggestive of the poorer class of grazier or miner in his coarse attire, and rather slouching movements.

"Fine day, miss," he said, taking the unoccupied seat alongside the solitary little traveler—she was not more than twelve, though with the easy self-possession of maturer years, so commonly met in American children. "Hope you hain't no objection ter my sharin' this hyar seat with you?" And he eyed her with a kindly, half-quizzical look.

"You should have asked me that before taking it, sir," she replied. "And the day isn't fine; it's quite cloudy."

There was an amused laugh from the rest of the passengers who chanced to overhear, in which none joined more unrestrainedly than the rosy-cheeked, sandy-haired newcomer himself, who haw-hawed out most breezily.

Then he opened his traveling bag, out of which he produced an enormous slab of appetizing looking ginger-bread.

"Have a hunk, miss?" breaking it in two, and offering the larger half to his little traveling companion. "It's lickin' good you'll find," biting into his own piece with unaffected gusto, "an' mebbe you'll find it your taste in this mountain air."

"Thank you, sir," a little more sociably

than before; and then, with the ginger-bread—"gunger-gog" he called it—as a peace offering between them, in a very short time the most agreeable relations were established.

"This hyer gunger-gog ain't so bad, er?" asked the man.

"It is very excellent, sir," replied the little girl, "I'm so glad you gave me some!"

"Air ye? Wall, now, that's nice. Goin' fur, may I venture to ask, miss?"

"To Canyon City, sir."

"Hullo! Why, so be I! Come from fur away?"

"From New York, sir."

"Hu! Wall, now, you air a trav'ler, an' no mistake, miss! Suthin' in ther school-teachin' or sight-seein' line, mebbe?" This quizzingly, seeing that she was still but a child.

"No, sir, not quite," with a twinkle of merriment behind her seriousness. "I'm an express package."

Her companion stared, but then began to understand—it being no unheard-of thing to thus dispatch children over great distances by express—and thereupon he burst into such a roaring, hearty laugh that the little girl laughed too, while the conductor sized up the stranger very favorably, and nodded encouragingly to his little charge as he passed down the aisle.

"But you mustn't think, sir," the little girl went on quite earnestly, "that I'm nothing more than an express package. Oh, dear, no! I am quite a young lady. And everybody treats me kindly, especially the conductors as I am passed from one to another."

"So'll I, by the holy mackerel!" cried her companion, slapping his knees, and producing another slab of ginger-cake. "Have another hunk 'ith me, do! Thet's ther tark. An' I'll purtect ye, too—stan' by ye agin anything, jumpin' or creepin', 'ith ha'r or feathers, road agent or grizzly—'s long ez I kin strike a lick or pull trigger. Thet's me, my leetle gel—thet's Country Claybank from A to Izzard, an' every day in ther week, Sundays included an' hollerdays not barred out. Haw, haw, haw!"

"Oh, dear, what a funny name," cried the little girl, laughing merrily, though with her mouth half-full of the hospitable ginger-

bread, while many of the other passengers turned to survey her hulking companion smilingly. "And is that really your name?"

"You bet, my dear! Hain't it a good 'un now?"

"R-a-t-h-e-r," a little doubtfully. "Mine is Kitty Fanshaw," with a sudden burst of reciprocal affability. "An' my mamma's sending me away out here to keep me safe from my wicked uncle; and my poor papa's dead more'n a whole year; and oh, how my mamma cried when she hugged and kissed me good-by; and so did I," with a quivering lip; "and my Aunt Fanny's to meet me at Canyon City; and I'm to be a very good little girl, and do just what she says."

"Hullo!" cried Mr. Country Claybank, no less surprised than gratified at this unreserved largeness of confidence in return for his bolder account of himself. "Wall, I'll be gol durned! Hev another hunk? No."

"Oh, no, thank you, Mr. Claybank, though you're very kind," quite composedly once more. "But, aside from my being already quite stuffed, you see, we'll soon be at my destination now, I think."

"Thet's so, my dear, the very next station. An' so," yet more interestedly, "Captain Fanny Fanshaw, of Esmeralda Ranch, is your auntie, eh?"

"Auntie Fanny is, sir, but I didn't know she was a captain. But her place is the Esmeralda Ranch, sure enough; and—oh, dear!"

There was a shock, a series of hard jolts, and then, as the train came to a stop, two men suddenly rose from a middle seat, faced in different directions, so as to command the entire length of the car, and produced cocked revolvers.

"Hands up!" roared one of them, with an oath. "Gentlemen, we're about to go through this train like a dose of salts. Out with your money and valuables, and be mightily lively about it!"

"A hold-up, by crimminy!" gasped Mr. Country Claybank, obeying the command with no less alacrity than his fellow-passengers—with the single exception of the little girl, who sat still, very white and terrified. "An' I'll bet my head it's a job of ther Killers of Kootenai!"

"Right you air, Hayseed!" replied one of the robbers, with a grim laugh. "Hold on, an' don't be impashernt; I'll reach you in half a minute."

The pair were already spryly at their work, relieving the astounded passengers of their valuables right and left; while a number of shots and fierce shouts outside and forward told of their confederates being similarly employed—doubtless chiefly with the express messenger, after having first derailed the engine.

At this juncture two or three more armed men entered the car at the forward end, a loud voice calling out from behind them:

"No harm to the little girl, if she is in there. She is my prize!"

"Oh, dear! oh, dear!" wailed little Miss Kitty, clasping her hands; "maybe it's my wicked uncle."

"Don't be—be alarmed, dearie!" gasped out Claybank. "Didn't—didn't I say ez how I'd purtect yer?"

A roar of laughter arose from the robbers, in which even their victims for the most part joined, so oddly did the words contrast with the manner of the hulking ginger-bread giver who had so recently vaunted his championship of the little one's friendless condition.

Indeed, he seemed the very embodiment of craven, convulsive fear, standing upright in the aisle, his knees knocking together, his hands high in the air, and yet waving jerkingly to and fro about his great heavy slouch-hat, as if desirous of doffing that also out of respect to the train robbers, if only the gesture might not be considered as against orders.

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed the villain nearest to him. "Now's your chance, country; shell out, me bold defender of beauty in distress!"

"But—may—may I lower my hands fur to do it, Mr. Man?" shiveringly beseeched the countryman, his paws still oscillating and flapping on high.

"No," gruffly. "Keep 'em up while I go through yer. But in the first place, let thet little gel step out o' ther seat. She's the one our leader's lookin' so sharp fur, I fancy, and——"

He went down with a bullet in his brain, while in each of the countryman's hands there was a derringer pistol—conjured up out of his hat-band by some lightning-like hocus-focusing with those strangely fluttering gesticulations over his head—and this was followed by the emptying of the companion pistol with no less success, the next nearest desperado wheeling, with a startled oath, just in time to catch the second bullet squarely in the center of the forehead.

"All with revolvers follow my lead!" thundered a commanding voice that it was difficult to recognize as the same which had piped out so pitifully from the same source but a moment before. "Quick!"

There were more shots, the car was filled with powder-smoke, and the late paralyzed countryman was seen springing nimbly through the car dealing out death-shots right and left with the revolvers snatched from the fallen men.

Just such a leader or organizer is all that is wanted to counteract the stupefying surprise which alone renders these western hold-ups and train-robberies possible, as prosecuted for the most part upon men not deficient in courage and vastly outnumbering their despoilers, often in the proportion of twenty to one.

Eight or ten of the passengers, revolver in hand, were speedily at the brave rustic's back, and the five or six immediate desperadoes having been summarily surprised in their turn, and shot to death in less time than it has taken to describe it, they rushed after him outside the train, to take part in the chief fracas going on forward.

With another plaintive little "Oh, dear! Oh, dear!" the frightened child, by this time all but terrified out of her wits, was left almost the sole occupant of the car for several seconds, when two men—evidently robbers, and hunted ones at that—rushed in from either end, with hoarse breathings and blood-shot eyes.

"Hyar she is!" shouted one, snatching up the child, heedless of her struggles and screams. "See 'f the coast's clear, Jim. We kin share in ther reward ther captain expects, 'f only——"

"Dastardly Killers!" roared a voice, fol-

lowing a leaping step into the car behind them; "the murderous doom that ye design for so many others is upon you!"

Then a shot, and the outlaw who had been addressed as Jim fell, just in the act of turning, with Country Claybank's bullet in his heart.

The remaining outlaw dropped the child, grasping his shooter, but at the same instant, as if suddenly appalled by the countryman's changed appearance, or recognizing him for other than he had seemed, staggered back with a certain name upon his lips.

It wasn't more than half pronounced, however, before the second report rang out, and he, too, was limp and dead over one of the seat-arms, shot through the body.

"Thar, thar! Ye'll be all right an' hunky purty soon, dearie. Try an' git over them shiverin' shakerin' fits. Thet's ther tork. Wish I hed some more o' ther ginger-gog fur yer, but thar hain't a hunk left, not er crumb, not er bite. What! a'most yer purty leetle self again? Knowed ye'd come 'round. In less'n half an hour we'll be et Canyon, an' then hey fur Captain Fanny, an' ther leetle gel's face full er smiles again!"

It was Mr. Country Claybank, in his good-natured efforts to console the still more or less shocked and terrified little girl-traveler. The fight being ended with the complete and bloody discomfiture of the intended hold-up, and the train once more under way, after a brief detention—

"It was just awful, sir!" at last murmured Miss Kitty, looking up trustfully at her hulking new friend, who had so doughtily proved her benefactor indeed. "But then it would have been even awfuler but for your tremen-jious bravery. Oh, those dead men!"

She passed her hand flutteringly over her eyes.

"Yes, yes!" replied rosy-cheeks-and-sandy-beard, heedless of the respectful and admiring looks cast upon him from everywhere around the now crowded car, all the passengers in the train seeming to esteem it an honor to be in his immediate vicinity; "but thet'll do now, dearie. Try ter think o' suthin' else."

"But I can't," continued the child at his side, with a little shiver. "Oh! is it true

the poor express messenger was killed, sir, before the robbers were driven off?"

"He an' two other train men, but thet was all—all against at least a dozen o' ther Killers wiped out."

"Why do you call them the Killers, sir? Who are the Killers?"

"Let be, let be, thet's a good leetle gel! Think er suthin' else. See; hyar we air ter Canyon a'ready."

Yes, and amid a roaring excitement on the part of the rough townspeople, the news of the tragic interruption at Blue Cut, where the fight had occurred, having reached the place in advance of the crippled train itself.

Night was just closing in over the rough-built and heterogeneous but thriving, go-ahead little mining town.

A splendid-looking young woman, picturesquely costumed and superbly mounted, came whirling up through the vociferating crowd, attended by several cowboys in the capacity of her escort or body-guard.

"Anything of a little girl on the train consigned to me?" she called out, in an imperious but anxious tone.

"Right side up with care, an' hyar ye air, Captain Fanny!" was the shouted response, as Mr. Country Claybank roughly shouldered his way to her, carrying the child high up in the crook of his huge arm. "I ain't the regular messenger, mum—the pore chap hez cast in his chips—but hyar's your express package just the same."

"Oh, aunt—Aunt Fanny!" with an outstretching of the little hands; and then the little traveler was snatched up, heartily kissed, and then snugly ensconced before the young woman on her prancing steed.

Captain Fanny then drew a little apart from the jostling an enthusiastic crowd, signaling the man to her side.

"I am your debtor, sir, deeply your debtor for this day's business," she said, searchingly regarding his face through the growing dusk with a pair of coldly beautiful gray eyes. "And yet you seem to have the advantage of me on the score of acquaintanceship. Name, please?"

"Country Claybank, mum," smilingly, though with an awkward homage.

"What else?" in a lower and more confidential tone.

"Nothin' mum," scratching his head. "An' why shed thar be, mum?"

"Because," with a musical laugh, "such black eyes as yours are never naturally mated with a sandy beard and florid skin. Shall I expect you at the Esmeralda soon?" with a parting gesture in disregard of his rather chagrined or discomfited look.

He made an assenting sign. Then a last wave of the imperious hand, a parting cry, half of gratitude, half of protest, from her little charge, and she was up and away through the gathering dusk, escort and all, with a clattering of hoofs and a jingling of spurs.

Mr. Country Claybank seemed to have so little stomach for the tempest of admiration that was being forced upon him from all sides that he lost no time in ridding himself of it as best he might, and hurrying off to the hotel.

"Who is he?" was the question on a hundred tongues, but no one seemed able to answer it; and it was presently as a total stranger in the town, though the ruling hero of the hour, that our rustic at last found himself discussing a fairly good dinner amid the seclusion that he seemed chiefly to desire.

A waiter, however, ventured presently to intrude upon his gastronomical privacy, saying, with the profoundest respectfulness:

"Cud ye corndescend ter see the editor o' ther Canyon City Hewgag, sir?"

"No," replied Mr. Claybank, somewhat gruffly. "But you may say thet I'll drop in ter his ofrice in an hour."

CHAPTER II.

CANYON CITY.

True to his promise, Mr. Claybank was presently closeted with Mr. Jefferson Davis Blazer, in the official den of the Hewgag, as the journalistic mouth-piece of the booming community of Canyon City was expressively, if not altogether euphoniously designated.

Some conversation as to the sensation of

the hour had already passed between him and his visitor.

"Here's the quandary I'm in, my dear sir," observed Mr. Blazer at length. "Just before the news of this affair arrived, I was about winding up with this editorial for to-morrow's Hewgag, giving these infernal Killers of Kootenai particular Tophet—handlin' 'em without gloves, you know, recommending their summary extermination by bullet, knife, rope, and all that sort of thing—and now I can't. See?"

"Naw, I don't 'see?'" was Mr. Claybank's surprised reply. "What's to hinder your shootin' off the print-stuff? Jest ther ripe occasion fur it, I shed say."

"Can't be done, I'm afraid," he said. "Whole thing knocked into a cocked hat!"

"But why?"

"In the first place, the Blue Cut outrage, which was so gallantly frustrated chiefly by yourself, was evidently the work of the Killers, and Mountain Lion Mike—Mike Bradshaw—their leader."

"Yes, yes; dang it all! but what of thet?"

"And lastly, this hold-up, or attempted hold-up, like its predecessors, is bound to be succeeded by twenty or thirty of the Killers riding through and terrorizing Canyon City—doubtless to-morrow—as a sample of what they might do in the way of revenge, if they chose to. And with this proposed article of mine in fresh print against 'em, how long would it be before this little newspaper property of mine—all I have in the world—would be burned down over my head, with perhaps myself and assistant yonder, riddled or gibbeted as a dessert for the infernal banquet. Understand?"

"Bull-yokes an' kickin' steers! no, I don't, by a thunderin' sight!" cried the other. "An' what air the men o' this hyar town doin' while these galoots air ridin' over 'em rough-shod an' cloven-hoofed thusaway?"

"Indoors, for the most part," coolly, "and thanking their stars if they escape with unperforated skins."

Mr. Claybank seemed to reflect deeply for some moments, with his eyes on a vast meshy object that was lying, like a great fishing seine, or giant's hammock, huddled up

among a lot of lumber in one corner of the dusty, shabby office.

"Suppose you had a leader, Mr. Editor—one of the right sort, I mean; could a score or so of fearless, honest men be depended on to back him in an attempt to oppose such an outrage as you apprehend on the part of these murderous ruffians for to-morrow?"

Mr. Blazer started in his seat so interestedly as not to remark the inadvertently cultivated change in his visitor's manner of speech, which was, moreover, sufficiently impressive in itself.

"Yes!" he cried, with sudden eagerness. "Anything to break the infernal, humiliating terrorism to which we have been so long subjected. But, good Lord! where is such a leader to be found?"

"In me," quietly.

The journalist hesitated, scratching his caroty head with the blunt tip of his idle quill.

"Look here, Mr. Claybank," said he; "you acted like a thousand of bricks in this Blue Cut affair. There's no denying that. But, you see, in spite of the mighty good man you have to-day shown yourself to be, you're still a stranger among us, and—er—no offense intended, on my honor—er——"

"Say loutish an' countrified—a leetle hay-seedy," complimented the other, smilingly, and with perfectly restored good-nature. "Thet's about your meaning, eh?"

"Well, frankly, yes."

"My appearance's sorter agin me?"

"That's it."

"How," with a low and peculiar laugh; "would this do for a change, then?"

And, with a few lightning-like manipulations of his person, the visitor suddenly stood up so transformed as to cause the editor of the Hewgag to spring to his feet with an exclamation of absolute amazement.

"Can it be possible?" cried the latter, with both wonder and delight. "Diamond Dick!"

The transformed smiled in his gentle, melancholy way.

"How might I fill the bill now, Mr. Editor?" he repeated.

But Blazer had already grasped his hand, with a profusion of congratulations and apologies.

"Good Lord, don't mention it!" he exclaimed; "why couldn't you declare your true character before? Fill the bill? Why, there's not a good man in the town but will go wild with delight to know of your presence here! Have a nip, do! I've got a private bottle here of the genuine stuff!"

"No, no; thanking you just the same. But how about that incomplete slashing editorial now. And in the meantime, I'll resume my ass's skin, as you might say," which he forthwith proceeded to do, speedily reappearing in the useful if less ornate personality of Mr. Country Claybank.

"Eh? What?" Mr. Blazer, who was slinging ink like an inspired maniac, paused to look around a little disappointedly. "But my dear sir, is that for the best? Why continue the clod-hopping disguise?"

"Perhaps," with a smile, that was all Mr. Claybank's own, "to spring a sleeved-trump, in the way of a revelation, on the Killers even more effectually than on you. Why not?"

"True—true. However, in the way of organizing, your true name and personality, in themselves a tower of strength——"

Mr. Blazer paused and gazed upon his visitor, who was quite uniquely engaged in spreading out the meshy object already alluded to, all over the floor.

"What on earth are you driving at, Mr.—er—Claybank?" cried the editor.

"Takin' stock in this thing," was the reply. "A fish-net, ain't it?"

"Yes. Tommy and I built her up for catching sturgeon over in Indian Lake."

"Big ez all creation, this hyar net."

"Yes; might scoop in something less'n an acre or two, perhaps; but then Tommy and I are men of rather liberal ideas."

"Tough 'nough, too; them meshes. What's ther brand o' cordage—ship's cable or clothes line?"

"Between the two, perhaps," and Blazer laughed. "Tommy and I had to use what we could get, you see. Trouble was that it scared more fish than it caught."

"Jest ther thing, though. Not a bad sort o' drag-net, eh?"

"But that's what it is."

"I don't mean fur fish, but fur Killers, on occasion, see? Thar's fishers of fish,

an' thar's fishers of men. Ain't thet ther Sceptur tork?"

"Something of the sort, I believe. But what are you driving at?"

"But it would serve to drag-net men on occasion, eh? an' if properly worked? Tell me thet first."

"Yes—yes; almost a regiment of 'em, for that matter."

"An' these Killers, when paintin' the town, prob'bly cavort and whoop right up an' down street in front of this hyar orfise, I suppose?"

"Should say they did."

"Got any long, stout poles handy, what could suddenly be let down from the front o' this hyar buildin'—suthin' ter fasten this hyar drag-net to f'r instance?"

"Hallo! Yes, I reckon so. But look here, wouldn't this be a rather risky piece of business?"

"Leave thet ter me. Beginnin' ter twig my meanin' though, ain't yez?"

"Yes, yes; perhaps so, but——"

"Come hyar, Mr. Editor!" and Mr. Claybank forthwith drew Mr. Blazer into a corner, where for a long time they engaged in low and earnest conversation.

At length a regular convention for speedy and organized action was made between them, after which the editor gave his attention to the work of getting out the Hewgag, while the pretended countryman set out to return to his hotel, the Coeur d' Alene Saloon Hotel, but a short distance away.

But as he emerged from the printing-office shanty, there were shots and pistol flashes off in the direction of the hotel, together with shouts, curses, and the usual concomitants of a far-Western street affray.

The sham countryman bent his head, his coal-black eyes fixed penetratingly upon the spot indicated, with a glance that seemed to make nothing of the intervening star-lighted room, his nostrils quivering at the powder-smell with the fierce instincts of the born gladiator that he was.

"Handsome Harry in danger?" he muttered between his teeth. Come, now!"

And he was at once bounding toward the scene of disturbance.

CHAPTER III.

A FEW PRELIMINARIES.

One man, pretty well half-seas over, being assailed by a dozen or more ruffians, for the most part as drunk as he, as many more law-abiding lookers-on clustered about the hotel entrance, and either too timid or too indifferent to interfere—revolvers flashing and bullets flying at random, but as yet without any serious injury on either side, thanks, most likely, to the influence of Mr. John Barleycorn—such was the situation as Mr. Country Claybank bounded forward to participate therein.

He had, however, been recognized by several of the non-combatants as the hero of the Blue Cut affair.

One of these, a small, black-whiskered, rather nervous looking man, succeeded in momentarily intercepting him.

"For the Lord's sake, don't interfere, Mr. Claybank!" this man exclaimed. "You're too good a man to be done up by that gang. They're Killers, every mother's son of 'em, though pretending to be honest miners and cowboys, like the rest of us!"

"Hul!" with a contemptuous snort. "An' who air you?"

"Justice of the Peace and Town Marshal Codger, sir!" yet more hurriedly. "But you see, these Killers are so numerous and thoroughly organized——"

"Sho! A purty peace-maker an' town marshal you! Out o' ther way!"

And with a last eager bound, and no visible weapons but his brawny fists, the rescuer was among the single man's cowardly assailants like an animated cyclone.

A shouldering, irresistible rush, a prodigy of pugilistic lightning work, flying out here, there, and everywhere, apparently with ubiquitous and sledge-hammer effect, four men down in a heap, two others, each gripped by the throat, with their faces being beaten and hammered together until they were nothing but bruised, bloody pulp, then an ostensible ringleader jerked to his knees, with the muzzle of a hastily snatched cocked

revolver thrust half-way down his gullet, and the fracas was at an end, with the unpros-trated Killers in panic-stricken, if but temporary, rout, and the rest of them, crest-fallen and bewildered, skulking, crawling, and slinking out of sight, apparently only too thankful, for the nonce, in escaping with whole bones and partly recovered weapons.

"What!" exclaimed the rescued man—Diamond Dick's old-time side partner, happy-go-lucky Handsome Harry, the erstwhile "Sarpint of Siskiyou County," and no mistake—coming forward with outstretched hand, to say nothing of a slightly bleeding and somewhat battered head-piece, "you hyar, Di——"

A swift gesture caused him to check himself.

"But I mout hev knowed it from your perticklar style, old man."

And he silently wrung his deliverer's hand.

"Thet's all right," was the cool response. "You're not badly done up?"

"No; a few smashes, though they mout hev been wus. Ye see, these hyar Killers, seemin' disposed to run the hull town in thar own way——"

"Stow that, and let's licker up. Come, friends," with a gesture that included the by no means reluctant hangers-on, who forth-with followed rescued and rescuer into the saloon, with renewed cheers for "Bully Hayseed, ther King-Pin of Blue Cut!" as our countryman had come to be designated among them.

"Where is Bertie?" demanded the disguised adventurer of his rescued satellite, at the first convenient opportunity. "He should have preceded me hither from the Nez Percez Agency by several days."

"He's around somewheres," was the reply. "Should hev turned up afore now."

"Has he been to the Esmeralda Ranch, do you know, according to my instructions?"

"Yes; and was to have gone there again to-day."

"Good! He'll be likely to show up in season. Read over this list."

And a paper was thrust into Handsome Harry's hands, his companion, meantime, scrutinizing the roystering crowds surround-

ing him with analytical and discriminating glances.

"Humph!" continued the latter, meditatively. "Sterling enough material here, though sadly run to waste, and only wanting organization and iron leadership to—however;" and he turned to Harry, who had spelled through the list of names by the imperfect light of a smoking kerosene lamp depending from the ceiling, and was eyeing him inquiringly. "You have read the names?"

"You bet, old man!" was the response. "How'd you git 'em?"

"With Editor Blazer's assistance."

"Good little man, that Blazer."

"How about the men named—are they here present now?"

"Every galoot of 'em," slowly, while looking over the crowd.

"Good men?"

"Solid an' true. But you haven't got Codger's name among 'em."

"What! That fluttering, nervous, black-whiskered little diatribe of a town marshal?"

"Old man, don't make no mistake. The little cuss is simply outer place—as a leader, worthless—as a well-led follower, something better."

"Good! Am glad to stand corrected. There are such men. Now, circulate among these chaps at once, with a view to organizing under my leadership on the spot, though you needn't reveal my identity quite yet. Don't care to travel on the old reputation on the start. In the meantime, I shall interview our landlord and his daughter, with the design of having our proposed meeting a secret."

"All right."

So, while Handsome Harry was carrying out his instructions before the bar, with the wherewithal supplied for keeping the jig-water circulating, as a general promoter of facilitation and good feeling, Mr. Country Claybank, still something of a stranger in town, though a more popular hero than ever, was cultivating diplomatic relations behind, or, rather, at one corner of it, with Brum-magem Hob and handsome Polly as his not unwilling auditors.

Suddenly, a fresh fusilade, together with

the rush of hurrying feet, gave indications of yet another street disturbance in front of the bacchanalian resort.

"Bertie!" suddenly exclaimed Handsome Harry, making a mad break for the entrance, gun in hand.

His disguised principal was after him in an instant, similarly provided against contingencies.

But before either of them could reach the broad entrance doors, they were burst open, and Diamond Dick's son, the boy Bertie, burst, back foremost, into the saloon, bleeding from a bullet-furrow across one of his ears, but a shooter in each hand, and shooting back into the night while maintaining his retreat.

The next instant, with a low, peculiar cry—perhaps suggestive of a tiger-mother in defense of her cub—the pseudo countryman was out into the obscurity of the shot-echoing street, with Handsome Harry—whom he had overtaken in several long, catlike bounds—faithfully at his heels.

Then a renewal and multiplication of the shots, a skurry of fugitive footfalls echoing away in the darkness; and when Hob Brixton and his patrons appeared upon the scene, with lanterns, four men were dead in the streets, while Mr. Claybank and his coadjutor were coolly recharging the emptied chambers of their revolvers, without either of them having received a scratch.

"Diamond Dick, beware!" suddenly shouted a loud, menacing voice, seemingly from somewhere out of the mysterious bosom of the night. "There's not a Killer of the Kootenai but marks you for his victim! 'Tis Mountain Lion Mike that says it."

The disguised adventurer made a spring, pistol in hand, in the direction from which the voice might have proceeded.

But there was only a mocking laugh, echoing away in the hollow of the night, a clatter of hoof-beats, likewise dying off in the distance, and all was still.

"Diamond Dick!" exclaimed a dozen or more wonder-struck voices. "What did that mean? That dread and mysterious character among us, and we none the wiser? Impossible!"

The mystery was not solved for the wonderers, at least not just then; and, a few minutes later, the secretly organized town meeting for the protection of the community was being held in the Coeur d'Alene saloon, under locked doors, and with the pretended Country Claybank, already a controlling power, as the guiding spirit of the movement.

Vigilance committees de facto were more or less out of date, but the result of the deliberations was the organization of a sworn body of men, fifty in number, in the interest of law and order, and with the extermination of the Killers of Kootenai as the specific object of the corporation, under the absolute leadership of the gallant stranger, Mr. Country Claybank, by unanimous election.

The organization being completed, certain orders were accordingly promulgated on the spot, and the meeting dispersed.

Our hero resolved to inaugurate his rule, as in the best and truest interests of the law-abiding community, by manifesting the iron hand of discipline from the start, and at the very first opportunity.

It was presented almost immediately.

Apart from the fifty men sworn into the order, there had been a number of others present at the meeting, some of them unfit by age or occupation for the duties imposed, others were advocates of the proceedings, and yet others, for the main part idlers or hangers-on, whom it would require but few grounds to convert into objects of suspicion, as being possible spies for the enemy.

It was one of these latter who, at the general break-up, when an all-round night-cap was being taken at the proprietor's expense, preparatory to a final retirement for the night, smilingly approached our newly constituted town marshal, with another of his kidney.

"Mr. Claybank," said he, "my friend and I are about to make a break in this everlasting fire-water lush that seems to go here by opening a bottle of champagne. We should be highly honored to have you join us in a glass."

Claybank had before this remarked these two men; rather sleekish-appearing gamblers

or speculators, it would have been difficult to say which—and, moreover, at this juncture caught something like a warning glance from Polly Brixton, who was even then engaged in opening the wine that had been ordered.

He was occupying solely a small table at some distance from the bar, which was being noisily thronged by his new-made adherents, together with Handsome Harry and Bertie.

"With pleasure, friend," he responded, seemingly with his rough good humor unchanged. "But I'll have ter ask ye ter fetch the stuff over hyar, ez I'm so petered out 'ith bein' on my feet so long thet I kin hardly stir another peg."

Both men brightened up wonderfully, as if this might have been what they had secretly most desired, and Polly brought the wine and glasses on a salver forthwith.

The latter, four in number (one being for Polly herself on invitation), were carefully examined by the men who had first spoken, as if to make certain of their cleanliness, and then filled by him.

The new leader accepted the glass handed to him, and held it up critically to the light,

"All ready?" he asked, pleasantly, and disregarding of a certain agony of warning that was by this time in Polly's pretty eyes.

"Quite so, Mr. Claybank," responded the man, gayly. "And here's to your health and long life."

"Wait!" with sudden sternness, and the production of a cocked revolver. "We'll drink, yes; but you'll change glasses with me first!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE KILLERS SURPRISED.

The man thus unexpectedly addressed and menaced turned pale, trembling violently, while his companion maintained hardly any better countenance.

"Exchange glasses!" was the repeated order, this time with the revolver covering him. "Quick!" with a metallic ring of remorseless peremptoriness.

The fellow paled yet more, but silently obeyed.

"Now," while raising high his glass, but still with the other irrevocably "covered," "we will drink to a toast of my proposing. And, look you, friend, if one drop of your wine fails to go down your throat, a bullet is the penalty."

A crowd was already collected around the group, and there was a hush of death, though few understood the significance of what was going on.

"Ready for the toast?"

"Y-e-e-e-s!" stammered the wretch, now in a pitiable condition, though still maintaining the equilibrium of his glass in his fear-palsied hand.

"Here it is then: Confusion and death to the Killers of Kootenai. Drink!"

All four did so, unharmed, with the single exception of the suspected villian, who emptied his glass, indeed, but only to fall to the floor in writhing convulsions.

In a few seconds he was a dead man, as sufficiently evincing the fatal nature of the secretly administered poison that had been intended for the organizer of the Order of Fifty

"Now you!" thundered Claybank, and the villian's confederate was dragged to his knees, with the avenging clutch upon his throat. "Confess everything, on your life!"

"Mercy! mercy!" gasped the scoundrel. "But really there—there is no-nothing to confess."

"Out with it, and I give you the chance of your life against mine. Otherwise, you die like a dog. Confess! You and that villian are in secret league with the Killers of Kootenai."

"Yes, yes; it is true. We are Mountain Lion Mike's secret agents. Papers in my chum's pockets will show all. Now give me the chance you promised."

Claybank contemptuously released him, and then turned coolly to the proprietor.

"You, sir," said he, "shall measure the distance and give the word, if you please."

"Time and place?" demanded Brixton, scratching his bullet-head.

"Now and hyar, on ther spot, 'f you have no objections, landlord."

"What distance?" he queried.

"Over a hankercher, or a flip-up fur it,"

smilingly responded rosy-cheeked, sandy-whiskered Mr. Rusticity. "I hain't pertickler on my side."

"No, no!" yelled the unmasked spy, who knew himself to be a dead-shot; "twenty paces, an' back to back."

Mr. Claybank nodded agreeably.

In another minute the men were placed accordingly, a cocked revolver in the hand of each.

Word was given, the wheel being made and shots delivered, apparently with simultaneous precision.

The new leader of the Order of Fifty was revealed standing smilingly erect, without a scratch; the spy motionless on his back, with bullet-hole in the center of the forehead.

"Gentlemen," observed Mr. Claybank, with an unsuppressed yawn, "I'm dead tired an' no mistake. We'll now lick'er up at my expense, if you please, an' then I'm off ter bed. Mr. Codger, obleege me, 'f you'll be so kind an' condescendern, ez to examine that pizened chap's pockets at your leisure fur sech dockyments ez ther other cuss alluded to."

All this was accordingly done, after which the Order of Fifty quietly dispersed, evidently, we may be reasonably sure, with a very decided opinion as to the qualifications of their leader.

It was not till well on toward noon of the following day that the anticipated raid was made on the part of the Killers of Kootenai.

It first betrayed itself by a dozen or more pretended cowboys dashing helter-skelter on their ponies through the long stony street, whooping at the top of their voices, flourishing their whisky bottles and discharging their revolvers as they rode.

But at the lower end of the street the ruffians were suddenly confronted by a single horseman, apparently unarmed, who coolly sign'd them to come to a halt.

"It's a innercent leetle combined drunk, I suppose, gentlemen?" he pleasantly remarked. "Am I right, or am I wrong?"

"It's red paint thet may be war-paint," roared one of the raiders in response with the accustomed profanity. "Who ther thunder air you, anyway?"

"Ther new town marshal o' this hyar com-

moonity, thet's all," smilingly replied Mr. Claybank, for it was he. "Gentlemen——"

"Dose him!" shouted yet another ruffian. "It's thet hayseed galoot thet cooked ther Blue Cut hold-up yesterday."

The Leader of the Fifty was forthwith surrounded, the dozen or more revolvers being flourished threateningly about his head, though he actually seemed to admire the sport, so cheerful and smiling was his equanimity.

"Tell us what thet blamed thing means up yonder at the Hewgag office," cried the first speaker, who seemed to have some nominal authority over his companions, "an' we'll be all right, marshal."

"Eh, what is it?" and Claybank followed the prevailing example of peeking curiously back up the long street. "'Pears like er p'litical banner, don't it?"

The strange object referred to was nothing more nor less than the vast stout-corded fish-net, which had indeed been spread out between the second story of the newspaper shanty and the building opposite, very banner-like, to be sure, but seemingly supported top and bottom by long, stout poles thrust out horizontally, and capable of being lowered or raised at will, after the manner of the guard poles at a suburban or village railroad crossing.

"Wall, now, thet is sin'glar!" continued the new town marshal. "What kin thet newspaper chap be up to 'ith thet sort o' sieve in the air, I want'er know?"

"So do we all want'er know!" clamored several voices, while the whisky-guzzling and revolver-flourishing continued unabatedly.

"Pop over ther galoot!" cried the same threatening voice again. "Blue Cut must be avenged!"

"Hullo!" exclaimed Mr. Claybank, in well-simulated surprise, "What hev you ter do with ther Blue Cut racket, my friends? Shorely ye air up-and-up cow-punchers, now, hain't ye?"

"Oh, of course!" from somewhere in the crowd, and then there was a roar of laughter.

But at this juncture there was seen a fresh gang of raiders careering down the street, yelling and shooting, and they also seemed

puzzled by the queer banner on exhibition at the Hewgag office.

"Hyar comes the rest of our fellers!" shouted one of those surrounding the new marshal. "Come on, boys. We'll meet 'em thar, an' find out what the pesky fish-net means. Fetch along this duffer with ye."

But "this duffer" at this moment backed his horse from among them, giving utterance to a shrill whistle, and straightway, as if by magic, a dozen or more armed, resolute-looking horsemen rode out and joined him from area-ways at either side of the street in which they had up to this moment remained concealed.

The pretended cowboys, finding themselves outnumbered, drew back, looking not a little astonished, for this sort of demonstration in the heretofore overawed community was wholly unexpected.

"Cowboys or Killers?" was the laconic query suddenly thundered out upon them by Mr. Claybank, now revolver in hand, and at the head of his serried followers. "Which air ye?"

"This!" yelled the leading raider, bringing his revolver to a dead aim, whereupon he was instantly shot out of his saddle by Bertie, who was the next horseman at Claybank's side.

"It's a plan—a trap!" roared another of the town-painters. "Quick, let us join forces with our other gang up yonder!"

And, firing a few random and ineffectual shots, they galloped off at a break-neck pace up the street.

The detachment of the Fifty followed them leisurely, leaving the dead ruffian lying as he had fallen, while his riderless pony went dashing away over the open country.

The pretended cowboys, on joining forces in front of the newspaper office, numbered over thirty in all.

This fact seemed to inspire them with fresh confidence and recklessness, and they at once began discharging their revolvers into the office windows, while two or three dismounted, in an attempt to smash in the door.

"They've got onto Editor Blazer's hot-shot newspaper tork at last, I reckon," observed Mr. Claybank, pleasantly. "For'ard's still the

word, men, but don't furgit former instructions."

Midway to the newspaper office, however, a halt was ordered for the reception of a messenger from the raiders, who was seen to separate himself from his fellows, and ride out alone, with a white rag fluttering from the point of his brandished revolver.

"You 'uns is evidently laborin' under a mistake," called out the herald, coming to a halt a few yards away. "We 'uns is jest hakin' a little fun 'ith thet newspaper galoot fur aboosin' honest men in ter-day's issue of his pesky sheet. See?"

"Cowboys or Killers?" was the only response, again thundered out from the leader of the Fifty, though with less than half his force at his back. "Which?"

"Oh, sho!" in answer. "We 'uns, yer see, only meanin' ter paint ther town red a bit, an' hevin' a leetle——"

"Cowboys or Killers? Which?"

"Killers all the time, an' every day in the month, blast ye!" yelled the messenger, losing his temper at last. "Gol darn yo're infernal, slab-sided hay-seed picter! 'F ye don't whistle a diff'rent tune, ar' thet mighty staident——"

He was interrupted by a snap-shot from Bertie, that tore away the flag of truce from his pistol muzzle.

Then, as he turned to fly in temporary panic, the knot of vigilantes were after him with such thundering abruptness that his entire gang, though outnumbering their assailants three to one, went flying up the long thoroughfare in more or less confusion.

"Halt!" cried Claybank, at last, as the raiders were seen to rally their forces, besides receiving a considerable addition to their number. "Thet will do fur the present."

Then, as the raiders came charging back in their turn, it was about face with the vigilantes, and away they sped on the retreat, the enemy filling the air with their random shots and victorious cries.

But while the fugitives were rushing past the Hewgag office, and ducking their heads under the fish-net banner, the latter trembled on the drop, so that Claybank, who happened to be the last man under, and carrying his heavy sombrero in his hand, to take the

wind on his perspiring forehead, was in some way caught by the hooks connecting the net with its lower pole or spar.

In a jiffy his wig, false whiskers, and long, close-buttoned duster coat were vigorously whisked away from his person, and presto! what a change!

It was no longer as Country Claybank, but as the dreaded Diamond Dick, the picturesque hero of numberless border adventures and hair-breadth escapes—handsome, pale, black mustached, black-ringed, eagle-eyed, and bediamonded from neck to knee, who smilingly followed his astounded command from under the banner that had thus been the cause of his unmasking.

He waved his hand in response to their wondering shout, and then, stripping from his sombrero its disguising scarf returned it to his head, as in keeping with the rest of his romantic costume, blazing, too, with its aigrette of glittering gems at the band-loop.

"Unmasked in spite of myself, boys!" he cried gayly. "Well, you shall see if I cannot lead you equally well in my true person."

A roar of enthusiasm was his response, but there was now no time for the indulgence of wondering gratification, for the Killers were thundering down upon them from the head of the road en masse.

A few of the foremost, who had chanced to witness and understand the transformation alluded to, wavered a little, but only with the effect of slightly confusing the charging mass when just on the point of passing under the banner.

Then the latter was suddenly dropped a matter of two or three feet, from an invisible agency, and the result was such as had doubtless never before been witnessed in far West mining town, or anywhere else, for that matter.

Fully one-half of the astounded raiders were suddenly swept out of their saddles, and scooped up, like so many human fish, kicking, gasping, and struggling, high in the belly of the stout net, while their riderless broncos galloped frantically hither and thither, and the unnetted but scarcely less demoralized ruffians were at once met by a counter-charge on the part of the handful of vigi-

lantes, such as sent them, panic-stricken and decimated, back up the street.

Better than this, the remainder of the Fifty, fully thirty-five strong, now suddenly appeared in their rear, and in less time than it takes to describe it, scarcely a ruffian was left alive to carry back the story of the disaster to Mountain Lion Mike.

Diamond Dick's drag-net had been tested, and was an unquestionable success.

CHAPTER V.

HO FOR ESMERALDA!

Nine Killers were found to have been scooped up by the net, and in twenty minutes after they were released from the meshes they were dangling by the neck, high in the air, from as many gibbet-boughs in the outskirts of the town.

In addition to this riddance, sixteen of their fellow-ruffians had been shot dead in the streets, making twenty-five thus summarily disposed of in all, while perhaps four or five had succeeded in making their escape.

Polly Brixton signaled Diamond Dick that she wished a private word.

"A messenger from Hesmerhalder, sir, as has just ridden hinto the stable-yard by the back way," she said. "I doubt not but 'ee wants to see you in strict private."

Diamond Dick thanked her, receiving a flattering glint from the young woman's bonny blue eyes in return, and was moving away, when she modestly touched his arm.

"What is it, Miss Brixton?"

"If I might be so bold as to ask, sir," she said, casting down her eyes, "might it be that you will presently go to Hesmerhalder, by reason of this 'ere messenger?"

"It is likely," was the reply. "In fact, it is more than likely."

"Well, sir," hesitating, "I want to ask a favor, if you'll honly not go for to think me too bold."

"Anything to serve you, my dear young lady. What is it?"

"This, sir," raising her eyes with a sudden indignant flash. "In case you should get 'old o' that howdacious villain, Mountain Lion Mike——"

"I sincerely hope for just such luck," seeing that she again hesitated. "And what then?"

"I want to hask you just to keep 'im for my father to 'ammer!" cried the young woman, most energetically.

"To 'ammer," repeated the other, perplexedly.

"Yes, yes; to 'ammer the hugly 'ead hoff of 'im, dontcher know?"

"Ah, yes; I understand."

"You see, the dirty loafer once tried to kerry me hoff," continued Polly, still furiously, "me, an' that hafter purtendin' to make honest love to me, and—— Well, Mr. Diamond Dick," with contrasting urbanity, "my daddy, you houghter know, was the champion welter-weight pug o' Birmingham and Smithfield market, afore comin' to this bloomin' country, and if I were honly sure of 'is gettin' the chance to 'ammer, 'ammer, 'ammer the 'ead hoff o' the howdacious 'ound real good and 'ard, I'd feel a little better satisfied. That's it."

Diamond Dick smilingly promised to preserve the outlaw chief for the prospective ordeal, if opportunity and Judge Lynch would permit, and then hurried away to the stable-yard.

An under-sized but hardy-looking ranchero, bearing the marks of recent long and hard riding, advanced to meet him, as he entered the corral, saying:

"Sir, I'm Broncho Bob, and I've a message from Captain Fanny. Perhaps you have heard of me before?"

"Certainly, from my son Bertie," replied Diamond Dick, grasping the extended hand. "Take a seat here, until your message is delivered, after which I can entertain you more hospitably. What is it?"

"I'm to tell you, in the first place," said the young man, accepting the improvised seat offered, "thet ther leetle gal, as Captain Fanny was expectin' of from the States, has arrove."

"Ah, yes; I had something to do with little Miss Kitty's advent in our community here, as perhaps you know."

"Yes, sir, from Miss Polly; but Captain Fanny don't as yet," with a broad grin. "And it's surprised she'll be, I can promise you, sir,

to learn that Mr. Country Claybank, ther king-pin o' ther Blue Cut scrimmage, an' Mr. Diamond Dick, ther all-round champion sport o' these hyar territories, is one and ther same duck."

"Likely enough. But her present message is doubtless for me in my own person, since I am here in accordance with certain letters received by me from the lady when I was at the Nez Perces Agency."

"Right you are, captain."

"What other word does she send me, then?"

"That Mountain Lion Mike is gatherin' a big gang o' ther Killers somewheres near his fastness in the Bitter Roots, seven miles east o' Esmeralder, 'ith ther avowed intention o' scoopin' in ther kid from ther States, 'f he hez to burn up ther hull ranch ter git her, thet——"

"Ah, indeed, but go on, pray. Something else, eh?"

"Thet the gal's uncle, Mr. Carbury, is ith Mountain Mike an' the Killers now, 'ith slathers o' money an' whisky fur ter see ther thing through——"

"Oho!"

"And thet mebbe you oughter be on hand fer ther scrimmage as is in prospect 'ith ther least possible delay. Thet's 'bout all thar is inter it, captain."

"And quite enough, in all conscience," with an easy laugh. "But look here, my man, perhaps you may have heard of what has chanced hereabouts to-day."

"I should say so! Twenty-six of 'em rubbed out at one swoop! By Jimminy! But then, you see, Captain Fanny can know nothing of this as yet!"

"True; though she will probably have the facts before night."

"Sartain, Captain; when I take 'em back to her."

"You return at once, then?"

"Before nightfall, that's my orders."

"Will not Miss Fanshaw feel less apprehensive, then, when she learns of this serious diminution of force that the Killers have sustained?"

"Easier, mayhap, captain, but not altogether safe, by a thunderin' sight," was the response.

"Has Mountain Lion Mike so many Killers left, then?"

"Why, captain, ther foot-hills o' ther Bitter Roots jest swarms with 'em, an' desperadoes is a-flockin' to him every day from ther North Pacific Railroad line clean up ter ther Dominion boundary. Ther loss of this hyar gang wiped out by you fellers ter-day won't be felt any more than a tincupful out of a barrel. I'd bet my head thet he kin muster ninety or a hundred Killers, new and old, any day in ther week!"

"Humph!"

"Besides thet, you must know ther disposition o' ther brute—savage ez a grizzly, wily ez a fox, wise ez a rattler. He'll be thet hop-pin' mad fur revenge, when he hears o' how you've hanged, peppered and drag-netted these chaps ter-day, that all ther powers o' hell won't be able to hold him in."

"Ah, indeed; quite likely."

"Besides, think o' thet Blue Cut hold-up thet you chiseled him out of so slick, to boot."

"I have thought of it," brusquely. "Still as I understand it, Miss Fanshaw's ranch is in a fair state of defense?"

"Yes, fairish. A tough, old-fashioned hacienda-like adobe buildin', suthin' on ther castellated style, I suppose you'd call it."

"How many men could she muster from off her estate, in such an emergency as she seems to apprehend?"

"'Bout twenty, all told, 'thout countin' in the peon an' women house-servants."

"Is that all?"

"Yes, thar's as many more, but they'd hev to be out 'ith the droves an' sheep-flocks, you know."

"Would a reinforcement of twenty-five men from here put the ranch in perfect security?"

"You bet! and agin all odds that cud be brought agin it, I'm thinkin'."

"Good! what is the distance to Esmeralda?"

"A matter o' seventeen miles."

"Good road?"

"Bad—in ther mountings; better beyond Mormon Top."

"Where is that?"

"Ten miles away."

"We shall start with you in the cool of this evening."

Broncho Bob started to his feet with a broad grin and a happy brow.

"Won't Captain Fan be happy?" he exclaimed. "No more anxious worritin' over the kid—no more sleepless watchin' an' fearin'—in spite of her brave heart. Oh, but it'll do me good to see ther shadders skip away from her sweet face."

"You seem honestly fond of your employer."

"Thar ain't a man at Esmeralda but wud die fur her, an' deem hisself lucky in gittin' ther chance," was the simple rejoinder.

Three hours later on, Diamond Dick, at the head of twenty-five picked men from among his sworn fifty—the remainder being left for home defense—and with Bronco Bob as guide, galloped out of Canyon City, and the watch-word for the time being was "Ho for Esmeralda!"

CHAPTER VI.

INTERCEPTED.

A lovely moonlight night.

The relief party for Esmeralda from Canyon City had come to a temporary halt, on the picturesque declivity known in the Kootenai district as Mormon Top.

The vast estate of Esmeralda, beautifully diversified, lay below, like a charming vision in the moonlight—an Eden of soft peace amid the eternal savagery of the surrounding mountain walls.

Far away on the valley's outermost rim, and just under the first upspring of the Bitter Root out spurs, or foot-hills, was a dimly outlined vision of white in the silvery shimmer and shine, that was the main ranch or hacienda building, with its attendant huts, out-buildings and corrals.

"Thar she is!" cried Bronco Bob, pointing away with his hand, and specifying one after another the various attractions of the spot, for the benefit of such of the party as were now gazing upon the lovely picture for the first time; "the purtiest, valuablest, toniest ranch in all Idaho! God bless Esmeralda, an'

God bless ther beautiful woman as owns and runs it!"

Suddenly he started, however, bending forward eagerly, while shading his eyes from the downpour of the flooding moonlight.

Distant shots were heard, and presently, far away, on a comparatively level plain, about midway between the bottom of the slope and the remote ranch buildings, a small group of horsemen were seen flying before a much larger force, that was in hot pursuit, firing as they rode.

"Captain Fan herself, by crimminy!" cried the cowboy; "an' havin' a close call from a big gang, most likely ther Killers themselves! I kin see ther flutter of her long ridin'-skirt. Whoop! Diamond Dick, no time to be lost 'f we're to take a hand in this racket!"

"Forward!" was the stern command.

The cavalcade moved off at as brisk a pace as the steep down-trail would admit, and, reaching the bottom of the crest, at once set out in a long, hard, hand-gallop in the direction indicated, the shouts sounding nearer and nearer as they covered the ground.

At last a knoll was crested whence the chase could be observed comparatively close at hand.

The fugitives, consisting of Miss Fanshaw and four attendants, were still riding as for dear life, but apparently without any of them having been wounded as yet, though their pursuers, twenty or thirty in number, seemed to be fast gaining on them, and were pressing on with fierce, exultant shouts.

Bronco Bob had already spurred forward in advance, waving his lariat as a signal for relief being at hand.

"Open ranks!" was the command.

The vigilantes spread apart, and the hunted woman came dashing in among them, with her followers, making a graceful gesture of acknowledgment as she did so.

"Close ranks!" came the fresh order. "Forward—charge!"

Then the entire relief party went thundering down the slight rise, firing as they sped, the opposing horsemen seeming to waver, after which they drew up across the trail, and awaited the onset.

Miss Fanshaw had in the meantime spoken a few words explanatory of the situation.

Anxious at the delay of her messenger's return, and there being no signs of an attack from the robber fastness to the east, she had set out with her escort in the hope of meeting him. Within less than a mile out from the ranch, however, the pursuing force had unexpectedly disclosed itself, and then had ensued the chase that had just been witnessed.

Now, almost at the first shock of collision, the robbers gave way, and in a few moments were seen scattering off through the timber-clumps in every direction, with at least seven of their saddles emptied, so far as could be observed from the position occupied by Captain Fanny and her body-guard, and the victors in hot though brief pursuit.

"Whoop!" excitedly shouted Bronco Bob, who had remained at his young mistress' side by special command. "Thar they skip! But what else could yer expect with Diamond Dick in the lead?"

"Yep!" observed one of the escort; "but Mountain Lion Mike hisself wa'n't 'ith thet troop o' Killers, er they wouldn't hev scattered out in thet mean kiote way!"

"Mebbe it's a trap," suggested another. "Them Killers is ekal ter anything, Mountain Lion Mike or no Mountain Lion Mike, you hear me! Leastways, ma'am," he touched his hat to Captain Fanny respectfully, "we mout ez well be on our guard while ther relief gang's so fur away."

"Be quiet, all of you!" Captain Fanny peremptorily interposed. She was surveying the wind-up of the distant skirmish through a night-glass with absorbing interest, while sitting like a statue on her magnificent steed. "Ha!"

"Yes, ma'am," responded the last speaker; "but ez I was a-sayin' 'f it mout be a ruse of ther Killers fur ter git your own person inter thar hooks, why——"

"Ridiculous, Mustang Mat, ridiculous!" said the proprietress of Esmeralda, contemptuously, and she threw a swift glance around her in the vivid moonlight. They were on a slight rise of open ground, with clumps of trees here and there, and, save for the distant shots, the solitude seemed absolutely unbroken. "We are perfectly safe here."

She was again adjusting the field-glass to

her eyes when crack! rang a report from near at hand, and Bronco Bob uttered an exclamation of pain.

"I told yer so!" shouted Mustang Mat, whipping out his shooter, as did likewise his companions. "By Jupiter! and hyar they come. Close in, boys!"

A score of horsemen had suddenly spurred out of the clump from which the shot had preceded, and were already sweeping down upon the little group with waving revolvers and fierce shouts.

Miss Fanshaw had also drawn her revolver—she was reckoned as good a shot as any man on her estate—and, though pale, was resolute and stern, her beautiful features showing like marble in the moonlight.

"Stand back—don't close round me!" she commanded. "There, that is better," as her five attendants obediently fell in line facing the foe, with herself in the center. "Bronco, can you still shoot?"

"Like a platoon, Captain Fanny," was the cheerful response of the wounded guide, revolver on half-cock. "'Twas me left shoulder ez was plugged."

"Here they come!" she continued. "Now wait for the whites of their eyes, and be ready for the word."

It was a gallant stand that the lady of Esmeralda and her five cowboys were making against more than quadruple their number; but at this juncture, and when about a hundred yards away, the charging column suddenly came to a halt, spreading out like a fan as it did so.

"Miss Fanshaw!" called out a clear, ringing voice from somewhere behind the hostile horsemen; "on my honor as a gentleman, no harm is intended you, if you surrender quietly. But if you provoke us to violence by unnecessary resistance, the responsibility will rest with yourself."

Captain Fanny had started upon hearing and recognizing the voice—the voice of Kitty's uncle, whom she had known personally years before—her fine eyes flashing furiously.

"What, George Carberry!" she said, "is it you?"

"Yes."

"You to talk of the honor of a gentleman!" almost in a scream, and with inde-

scribable scorn. Then, in quieter command to her men, "forward, at break-neck, firing as you charge!"

She led the audacious attempt by giving free rein to her superb brute, firing as she did so, and then her hardy escort were with her in a mad gallop, and with a midway volley, that at once emptied two saddles from among the astounded Killers, who were taken completely by surprise.

However, it was a piece of desperation that seemed likely to cost the doers dearly. A roar of execration rose from the Killers, and, opening out their line, they began to wheel around the charging few, yelling for vengeance, but without firing, probably for fear of wounding the lady, whom they seemed bent on taking uninjured.

"Kill 'em all—all but the lady!" shouted the same voice, though without disclosing himself. "I want her for hostage."

Captain Fanny and her men had meantime come to a halt, facing their circling foe as best they might, and about giving up all hope of escaping death or capture.

But at this juncture there was a clarion-like shout from a neighboring thicket, and a single horseman was seen galloping to the rescue at a tremendous pace, and yet firing as he came with a deadliness of marksmanship that seemed little less than miraculous.

Saddle after saddle was emptied, and though the Killers at once devoted their entire attention to him alone, both with their revolvers and their Winchesters, the man seemed to bear a charmed life. On and on he came careering toward them with the remorselessness of doom, and at every crack of his unerring revolver—which was no sooner emptied than another was snatched from his belt with lightning-like rapidity—either a horseman pitched, with a death-cry off his plunging broncho, or a horse and his rider together went down in a heap as the winged death-bolt chanced to catch the former fatally in his maddened rear.

"Whoop!" yelled Bronco Bob, also opening fire, together with his comrades, upon the scattering and demoralized Killers; "it's Diamond Dick! Cheer up, Captain Fanny. We're all hunk now."

But she scarcely seemed to hear him. Her

own revolver hung listless in her hand, and, statuesque amid the flying shots, she sat her horse beautifully and marble-pale in the moonlight, her whole being absorbed in watching the approach of the rescuing horseman.

But a tragic episode was already ended, the eight or ten Killers—all that were left of the original score or more—being in full flight—panic-stricken at the onset of a single man.

"Fanny Fanshaw, farewell for the present," again rang out that voice from among the Killers at parting! "But, if you think to escape my designs upon the child, beware! These affairs are but diversions. What is doing at Esmeralda while you are away? Ha, ha, ha!"

She could merely distinguish a tall, masked horseman as the probable utterer of these shouted words, and then he, with the others, had galloped away.

"Coward!" muttered Miss Fanshaw between her clenched teeth.

But then Diamond Dick came up to the group at an easy canter, and she extended her hand to him with a beautiful smile.

"Just in the nick of time, it seems," said Diamond Dick, with the smile that so rarely relieved the melancholy of his colorless face. "But come, Miss Fanshaw. The Killers will doubtless take care of their own dead men in good season," with a gesture that included the slain robbers scattered here and there, "and my party is awaiting us a mile farther on."

Captain Fanny simply inclined her head in acquiescence. Her eyes had already sufficiently expressed her thanks, and the group galloped away in the direction of Esmeralda.

"A good thing that you all got off as easily as you did," observed Diamond Dick. "But then these Killers are mighty small account on the shoot, so far as I have observed."

"It would have been different," said Miss Fanshaw, "if Mountain Lion Mike had been personally in their lead. It is strange," with a troubled look, "the amount of individual magnetism which that master-villain exercises over his followers. The least dangerous and desperate among them become perfect demons of bravery when led personally by him. How," turning her face fully upon Di-

amond Dick, who was riding at her side, "did you fare with chasing down my late pursuers, after they broke and scattered?"

"Badly, since they were better mounted than we," was the reply. "I think we must have killed half a dozen of them at the first charge, but our subsequent pursuit did little more than increase their panic. It was after we had reformed and were resting that I heard the distant shots, and surmised that you and your little escort were being attacked."

"And so you rode, unhesitatingly and single-handed back to our rescue."

"Believe me, ma'am, it was nothing," earnestly. "These Killers amount to so little, you see."

"No matter, sir," quietly. "I felt that you were coming."

"That is strange."

"Why?"

"Because I felt that I ought to come. In fact, so strong was the inner prompting that I should have done so, even if I had not heard a shot."

Her thoughtful face lighted up with one of her bright smiles.

"And you are, also, the Mr. Country Claybank, to whom my little niece Kitty, and others owe so much?" said she. "Bronco has told me all."

"It seems so, ma'am," was the quiet response. And then they came up with the relief party, who were already in the saddle again after their brief rest, and who, as one man, greeted their approach with a ringing cheer.

"Ah!" suddenly exclaimed Captain Fanny, with an abrupt impatience for a temporary halt; "Come, Diamond Dick. No more dallying. What! there are still miles between us and Esmeralda, and the parting words of that villain, Carbury, now recur to me with tenfold force."

"Certainly," replied the leader, giving the command forthwith which set the entire party in rapid motion. "You are sure," he continued, while again galloping in the advance at the young lady's side, "that it was Kitty's villainous uncle himself that called out to you from among the Killers?"

"Sure! As if I could doubt it? Do I not know that wretch of old!"

Then they galloped on, a suspicious luridness brightening in the sky ahead as they rode, and at the next rise of ground overlooking the ranch tracts beyond, an exclamation of mingled grief and fury burst from her lips.

"Ah, that villain's parting threat, it was no idle bluster!" she cried. "Behold—Esmeralda in flames!"

"Not quite so bad as that, ma'am," responded Diamond Dick, as consolingly as he might, his cooler vision taking in the situation more discriminately, notwithstanding his unfamiliarity with the locality. "An outer corral or two is in a blaze, to be sure, but the main ranch building is as yet intact."

"No matter," wildly. "See those Killers still at work in the red light, doubtless with Mountain Lion Mike himself at their head, and poor little Kitty may be already in their hands! On, on, on!"

No need of this injunction, however, as the cavalcade was already thundering to the rescue at the top of their speed.

CHAPTER VII.

MOUNTAIN LION MIKE.

As they drew nearer to the ranch it proved that Diamond Dick had been right as to the situation there.

It was only one of the thatch-roofed outer corrals that was as yet in a blaze. But then a vigorous attack was being made by a large body of the Killers upon the main building, which was being defended by a dozen or more cowboys and ranch-servants barricaded within; the shots flying thick and fast between the assailants, chiefly mounted, and the besieged, while a number of the former could be seen, in the fierce light, advancing on foot at the double-quick with an improvised battering ram for the purpose of smashing in the stoutly barred main entrance.

Those who would occasionally fall away from the heavy log, under the well-directed shots from within the building, would have their places quickly filled by others. Twice already had the huge ram struck the portals

with tremendous force, and it seemed evident even at the distance from which the on-rushing relief party viewed the scene, that the barricade must speedily succumb, if the assaults should be continued without interruption.

And all this sufficiently obvious in the fierce light of the conflagration with the relief party still two miles or more away, though pressing their jaded steeds to the utmost.

"Hurry, hurry, hurry!" almost screamed Captain Fanny, her solicitude for her little niece's safety completely overmastering her accustomed composure in danger for the time being, as she lashed her steed into long, frenzied leaps in the advance. "Good Heaven, if we should be too late. If my dead brother's little heiress should be in that cruel scoundrel's clutch before we get there!"

"Patience, ma'am. See they have already sighted our approach, and evidently don't like it. Who is that tall horseman, who seems to be everywhere at once, and regardless of the bullets? Can that be——"

"Yes, yes—Mountain Lion Mike himself! Hurry, hurry!"

"But he alone is masked."

"He has always been whenever I have seen him. Ha!"

The words closed with almost a shriek, her exhausted horse at that instant going down under her, while simultaneously the ranch entrance was seen to give way before the battering-ram, while a dozen or more of the Killers rushed into the building with an exultant shout.

But the relief party were now within less than half a mile of the exciting scene.

"Courage!" exclaimed the deep voice of Diamond Dick.

He reined in his steed just long enough to stretch out his hand. Captain Fanny, who had disengaged herself from her fallen horse with consummate address, seized it, and then, with a leap, she was gathered up before him, and the thundering onset was kept up, with scarcely the interruption of a dozen seconds.

"Ah, too late, too late!" almost sobbed Captain Fanny. "The child—my little niece—Mountain Lion Mike has got her!"

It was true. As the exultant Killers began to scatter, as if dreading to meet the charge

of the new-comers, the bravos who had rushed into the building came hurrying out of it, one of them with the little girl, kicking and screaming, in his arms, whom he at once placed in the hands of the tall masked leader. Then the relief party were on the spot, though with their animals completely blown, and, the Killers making a temporary stand, the bullets began to fly thick and fast from revolvers and Winchesters in the still lurid light of the burning stockade.

"Madam—Miss Fanshaw!" exclaimed Diamond Dick, still holding her before him on his horse, while the latter dashed on into the midst of the fray, "promise to remain here—to go in yonder out of danger, and I swear to you to restore the child to your arms. Have I your promise?"

"Yes, yes!" she cried eagerly. "But—ah——"

The words closed with yet another despairing cry, as Diamond Dick's overtaxed horse also at this instant went floundering to his knees.

"Ah, but now how will you do it?" she wailed.

"Wait and see!" was the stern response, and the next instant she saw him springing through the contending horsemen on foot, like a meteor.

"Bertie! Handsome Harry!"

"Ay, ay, dad!" responded the boy, spurring after him. "Hyar I be!"

"Count on me, old pard!" roared Handsome Harry, likewise urging his jaded steed after the agile figure of his beloved chief. "Arter you, ol' man, like a thousand o' gold bricks!"

But Diamond Dick had already shot out of the saddle a robber whose particularly fine fresh-looking horse had taken the fancy of his eagle-eye, and the next instant was on the creature's back with a swift bound, and riding straight at Mountain Lion Mike through the press, shooting his passage clear right and left, with a revolver in each hand, while guiding his animal's course solely by the pressure of his strong knees.

"Drop the child, Mike!" he thundered, at the same time sending a bullet point-blank at the masked leader's breast, though unac-

countably enough, without any effect. "Drop the girl, or your life is mine!"

Waving the still screaming child triumphantly on high, Mike spurred away to lead off the retreat of his Killers, who were now in full organized flight toward the distant Bitter Root Mountains to the east, anything like an effective pursuit being out of the question, on the part of the relief party, by reason of their blown and jaded mounts.

At the last moment Bertie, having exhausted both his revolvers, sprang from the saddle, snatched a Winchester from the hands of a freshly slain Killer, and, taking swift aim, irrespective of peril to the child, fired.

Mountain Lion Mike uttered a howl of pain and rage, as his lifted arm fell helpless to his side, and before he could recover himself, Kitty was free and unhurt upon the ground, running back in the direction of her deliverers.

For a moment he wheeled his horse, in hesitation, pouring forth a torrent of curses; but the relief band was already close upon him en masse, and he had to content himself with rejoining his fugitive men.

As has been intimated, no organized pursuit could be attempted. In a few minutes the well-mounted fugitives had disappeared, leaving ten or twelve of their number, all told, dead or wounded to the death on the ground adjacent to the ranch buildings.

Presently they all drew to one side to admit of the entrance of two or three men, and to all appearances unwillingly enough, who were bearing among them a helpless man, seeming to be desperately wounded, on a rude improvised stretcher.

The latter, a singularly handsome young fellow, blonde, beardless, curly-haired, and with blue eyes like a woman's, though now haggard and white, and with his hunting-shirt stained with blood where a bullet had probably torn its way through his lithe, athletic frame, turned a wan, half-conscious look on the group of three as he was being carried out of the moonlight into the comparatively gloomy interior.

"Why," commented Diamond Dick, in a lowered tone, and no little surprise, "that

fellow is one of the accursed Killers of Kootenai!"

"And one of the worst, in spite of his looks," replied the lady of Esmeralda, calmly, "besides being one of Mountain Lion Mike's most trusted lieutenants—Antelope Andy by name."

"And you have him brought in here to be cared for?"

"Why not? The man is apparently wounded to the death."

And she called peremptorily back to the litter-bearers:

"Take that man in the big room behind the court, where you will find old Malatta caring for the other wounded."

"Who is Malatta, if I may be permitted to ask, ma'am?" curiously inquired Diamond Dick, who had fallen into a thoughtful mood.

"Malatta," replied Captain Fanny, "is an old Shoshone medicine woman, who has long made herself very useful to my ranch establishment."

Then she held out her hand, with a smile of singular gentleness, saying:

"Good-night, my friend. One of my servants will presently show you to your quarters, and to-morrow, when all this danger and excitement shall be a thing of the past, we can discuss our business at leisure. And in the meantime, do not think me quite a fool for my magnanimity to any fallen foes."

"I couldn't think you that, ma'am," rejoined Diamond Dick, earnestly, after raising the beautiful extended hand to his lips with an air of old-time chivalry. "I can only question your judgment in the matter."

"Don't be too sure of that, either. There may be a method in my madness, as you might term it, that is not apparent on the surface. It is my little heiress here, not myself, who has prompted to-night's outrages on the part of the Killers here, and even that was at the instigation of that villain, George Carbury, and his money. But apart from that, if I were individually to fall into their hands at this moment, it would be but for a short time, and they would treat me with no great disrespect. I am sure of this."

These words suddenly recalled to Diamond Dick a not altogether disagreeable rumor

which had reached him at Canyon City, and he could not avoid giving the mistress of Esmeralda a swift look that at once attracted her attention.

"Why do you look at me thus?" she suddenly demanded, with a tinge of imperiousness "What do you mean by it, sir?"

"I shall not tell you," coolly. "That is, I do not think I shall."

"But you must—I insist! Ah, do you think my woman's intuition blind? You have heard certain suspicions whispered against me, back yonder in Canyon City. Do not deny it, Diamond Dick!"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE WOUNDED OUTLAW, ANTELOPE ANDY.

"Well, ma'am, it is true," replied Diamond Dick, slowly, and not without embarrassment. "But then the suspicions were not exactly against you."

"What were they?" demanded Miss Fanshaw, with renewed peremptoriness, though she seemed struggling to soften her tone. "Tell me at once, and without evasion, please."

"I never practice evasion, ma'am," was the coldly haughty reply.

"Ah, of course you do not. Forgive me, Diamond Dick, and do tell me just what you have heard."

"Only this, then, ma'am," was the now cordial response; "that you have so long enjoyed comparative immunity from these Killers of Kootenai, that——"

"Yes, yes," seeing that he again hesitated.

"That there might have been some mysterious connection between you and their infamous leader in past years."

The color swiftly rushed into the lady's lovely face, and then vanished, leaving it marble-pale as before.

"With the villain, Mountain Lion Mike, you mean?" she said, slowly.

"Of course, ma'am. Whom else?"

"Do you believe this, Diamond Dick?" she then asked, with sudden eagerness.

"No, ma'am, not for an instant," was the prompt and hearty response. "Do you think

I'd even have mentioned it if you hadn't forced me to?"

"Thank you; I am glad to hear you speak thus." And, once more bidding him good-night, she abruptly withdrew with her little niece.

Though it was well on to midnight when Diamond Dick retired to the apartment assigned to him, he was up and stirring soon after daybreak, when he chanced upon the cowboy, Mustang Mat, who was about to ride out over the estate, in accordance with previous instructions.

"I'll go with you, if you've no objections, and can give me a good mount," suggested Diamond Dick, in the amiable way in which he so readily made new friends when he chose.

"Objections!" cried the ranchman. "Brand me fer a maverick, sir, 'f I won't on'y feel ez proud ez a speckled race-hoss at ther chance!" And in a few minutes, duly armed and mounted, they were riding off side by side in the fresh-springing dawn-light.

In the course of the ride, Diamond Dick could not but be surprised at the vast extent and evident wealth of the isolated estate, with its sleek herds, and at the same time to wonder at the attractiveness of the ranch not having frequently been raided by the dreaded Killers of Kootenai, usually so indiscriminate and remorseless in their depredations, and with their chief mountain fastness in the Bitter Roots so comparatively near at hand.

On expressing himself to this effect to his companion, the latter looked up with a laugh, and with a significant shrug of his broad shoulders.

"Ther Killers," said Mustang Mat, "don't never hurt Esmeralder. That is," after a scowling pause, "they never did afore ther leetle kid came to us from the States, 'r was knowed ter be on her way to ther ranch."

"That seems odd, when the estate is so rich, and so convenient to their haunts."

"Not so all-fired odd ez you'd suppose," was the half-grunted response. "Captain Fan hez been mighty good to several of 'em in distress—makes no difference to her who the cuss is, so long ez he's sick or wounded," moodily—"an' I reckon they 'preciate it 'r did afore ther kid came. Look at thet Antelope Andy now," with a sudden burst of indignation, "what she's already set old Malatta to coddlin' an' wet-nussin' along o' thet bullet-hole in his infernal hide—the more the better fer him 'd say I an' every other man on the tract. As treacherous, murderous a Killer hound ez skips unchanged—bad ez Mountain Lion Mike hisself—an' yet—but sho!" with a muttered oath; "what's ther use

o' talkin'? 'Tain't fer me 'r any one else ter crittercise Cap'n Fan; an' besides," gloomily, "torkin' o' Mountain Lion Mike, thar may be even suthin' else behind it."

This caused Diamond Dick to prick up his ears, so to speak, though he strove to keep his natural curiosity from becoming too apparent.

"What do you mean?" he remarked, with assumed carelessness. "Surely Miss Fanshaw couldn't have any secret friendliness for Mountain Lion Mike himself?"

"I didn't say so, did I?" with a quick, suspicious glance. And as, after this, the man grew taciturn and moody, replying only in surly monosyllables to everything that was said in the way of interrogation, Diamond Dick wisely confined his speculations on the subject to his own thoughts.

Diamond Dick had the honor of breakfasting finely that morning with Miss Fanny and her little niece, alone, after which he accompanied the lady on an extensive ride over various parts of her estate, under a strong escort.

"We will talk of our particular business at leisure later on," she said, quite gayly, in the course of the ride. "In the meantime, it is agreeable enough for me to know that but little damage was done by last night's attack. Not one of my men was killed, few wounded, and none seriously, and the stockade that was burnt was an old one of little account."

"Yes," observed Diamond Dick, "everything considered, it seems to me that you got off cheaply enough, ma'am."

"Perhaps I need not have sent for you and your party, notwithstanding the inestimable service that you performed," and she looked at him with her dazzling smile. "Do you think that, Diamond Dick?"

"On the contrary," he composedly replied, "I think so directly the opposite that I have already sent to Canyon City for the rest of the Fifty to join me here as soon as they can leave the town under a secure home guard, as one might say."

"What! Do you apprehend that the Killers will attack Esmeralda again, and soon?"

"I apprehend that there's nothing like being prepared for anything, and that I shall carry the war into the enemy's country, with an effort to clean out the entire gang, root and branch, at the very first opportunity."

"What!" with a swift look of anxiety, that aroused his vague suspicions uncomfortably; "you will venture upon that?"

"Of course I will," sternly.

"But would it be altogether necessary?"

Before he could answer, her horse—the cavalcade was proceeding over a level stretch

at a smart trot—she set foot deep into a prairie-dog hole, stumbling crashing to his knees, while the limb was heard to break with a sharp snap.

In spite of her superb horsemanship, Captain Fanny would have gone flying over the animal's head, had not Diamond Dick saved her by a fortunate grasp upon the left arm.

His clutch at her arm had torn off the entire sleeve of her perfectly fitting green habit, which he still held in his grasp, and his eyes were now devouring the ivory-white, beautifully rounded member thus summarily bared to view with a pained, startled look, though it might well have passed for the famous lost arm of the Venus di Medici itself.

"What is the matter, sir?" sharply exclaimed the mistress of Esmeralda, coloring angrily. "Give me that sleeve, if you please. Did you never see a woman's bare arm before, pray?"

"Excuse me, ma'am!" shouted Diamond Dick, while obediently holding out the sleeve and pointing at a violet-colored, clover-shaped mark, distinctly outlined on the delicate white skin near the shoulder; "I—I was looking at that!"

"Ah, my birth-mark?" with thoroughly restored composure, or even indifference; and, hastily snatching the sleeve, she drew it over her arm and began to pin it in place with feminine deftness.

"Tell me," he exclaimed, with a sudden sternness that startled her; "is your name really Fanshaw? And were you an own sister to that child's father?"

"No," wonderingly, and not a little resentfully; "his half-sister. And it is a step-father's name that I bear. But look you, sir," proudly coloring again, "if you would presume upon our brief acquaintance, and the personal obligations you have placed me under, to——"

"Peace, peace," interrupting her impatiently. "Your own father's name was, then——"

"What I choose to remember it to have been, sir!" with angry hauteur. "How dare you address me as to the past, which is my own experience?"

"For this reason!" He bared his own left arm, magnificently muscular, yet white and shapely as a duchess', unfastening and rolling up the hunting-shirt sleeve with nervous haste, and disclosing a mark thereon almost the exact counterpart of her own. See!"

"What is this?" cried Captain Fanny, gazing with clasped hands and parted lips. "What does it mean?"

"Nothing—at present."

He hastily restored his sleeve, transferred her-saddle to the spare animal, assisted her to mount, shot the injured brute through the

head, galloped on at her side, without vouchsafing another word, notwithstanding that she cast more than one inquisitive, even half-timid, glance at his stern, preoccupied face.

The matter of business that was discussed between Miss Fanshaw and Diamond Dick a little later on—and to the total ignoring on both sides of the little episode just related—may be disposed of in a few words.

The Lady of Esmeralda being in daily expectation of her little niece's arrival from the States, and of the possible hostility of the powerful Killers of Kootenai thereupon, through the machinations of the wicked uncle—who was evidently bent on securing the little heiress' destruction, which would place him in possession as the next testamentary heir to the wealthy estate left by her father, who had been his, George Carbury's, half-brother—had communicated with Diamond Dick, then at the Nez Perces Agency, for the purpose of securing his general protective and detective services. He had responded agreeably, terms had been satisfactorily arranged, and, after sending on his son Bertie as his avant courier in the affair, here he was at last at Esmeralda, under the strangely dramatic, tragic, and adventurous circumstances that have been described. This was the state of the case in a nutshell.

"Now, if you please, Miss Fanshaw," said Diamond Dick, at last, "pray let me understand two or three points in this business that are not quite clear to me as yet."

"Whatever you choose to ask, my friend," was the amiable reply. "And you can address me as Captain Fanny, if you choose—pretty much every one else does."

"Thank you—though I may not so choose, or at least, not always. Well, then, Kitty's father?"

"Dead less than two years. Ah, and you wonder why he should have left a testamentary provision so perilous to his only child? Yes? Well, he didn't. It was through his father's (Kitty's grandfather's) will that this disposition of the property was enforced upon him, he and Carbury having had the same mother by different fathers. I, being likewise related to Kitty's father as his half-sister, was a child by previous marriage of yet another wife of Grandpapa Fanshaw's, my mother being his third and last. But enough of this, so far as I am concerned, and I hope I have sufficiently explained the complication."

"It will do," he said, briefly, "though it is considerable of a muddle."

"That is true," calmly. "What else is it that you would like to know?"

"Kitty's mother?"

"Ah, and you think it strange that she should not have found it easier to shield the child against her unscrupulous enemy in the populous, well-policed East than out here in the wild and woolly West? Well, in the first place, she is a hopeless invalid; in the next place, she could have had no idea of George Carbury having at odd times affiliated with the mountain outlaws of this very section, and, thirdly, she has an unbounded and perhaps highly exaggerated faith in me. There you are, sir."

"You have contracted for my services in the complication, ma'am," observed Diamond Dick, rising from his seat with a satisfied nod. "Let me ask if you are content with them as thus far demonstrated?"

"What a question! Of course I am, Diamond Dick, and a thousandfold more than I can express."

"Thank you, ma'am. I then furthermore engage to either completely extirpate these Killers of Kootenai, root and branch, or to drive them, broken and scattered, out of this Territory, so that they will never venture to return."

He looked at her fully and steadily as he spoke.

"This, as I understand it, is what you wish?"

"Yes," without betraying a flutter under his searching, soul-reading gaze. "Oh, yes, to be sure! Of course there can be no peace nor stability until they are—disposed of."

"Very good, ma'am. Then I shall take full and complete command and responsibility in the work before me. You will please bear this in mind?"

She colored, biting her lip, but for all, bending her head in haughty acquiescence. And that moment one of her women servants entered the room and whispered something.

"Wait—do not go just yet, Diamond Dick," said Miss Fanshaw, after dismissing the woman. "I wish you would accompany me on a rather painful errand."

"Certainly, ma'am; anything in the world. What is it?"

"You remember the wounded outlaw, Antelope Andy?"

"Certainly."

"Here is a dying message from him. A few months ago he ventured, almost single-handed, upon a drunken raid down this way. At the head of a few of my men, I drove him off, and captured his horse, Black Chief, unquestionably as swift and valuable a brute as there is in all Idaho. Andy now begs that I shall be present, with the animal fully equipped, when he is borne out on the prairie to die, beside his open and freshly dug grave, in obedience to his dying caprice. He would

look upon both myself, whom he seems to admire, and upon the noble brute that he so loved, before the last shadows darken over him, you understand?"

"Yes, ma'am," bluntly; "and I wouldn't grant it. I'd be suspicious of any Killer while a breath of life remained in his body."

"But I propose to see him first, to make sure of this. Will you accompany me?"

"Oh, yes, ma'am, of course!"

And they forthwith quitted the room together.

She gave some orders in accordance with the dying man's request, and then they were in the apartment where he already lay, to all appearances a pitiable wreck at his last gasp, on the litter on which he was to be borne away.

"How is this, Malatta?" said Captain Fanny, turning to the old medicine woman, who, with others, was standing about the litter; "you haven't even dressed this man's wound."

She pointed to the rent and blood-stained hunting-shirt still covering the man's injured chest, apparently just as when he had first been carried into the ranch.

"He wouldn't have it, chieftainess," gruntingly replied the old squaw, in her Shoshone dialect. "Said 'twas no use. Ugh! guess he was right. But then robber white men mighty tough."

And she shook her head dubiously.

CHAPTER IX.

AN OUTLAW'S RUSE—DIAMOND DICK'S UNLOOKED-FOR PERIL.

Antelope Andy here made a feeble but emphatic gesture of impatience, and he gave the lady an imploring look out of his haggard eyes.

"Right, right—no use!" he managed to say, in a hoarse whisper. "Medicine for a man with a big hole in his ribs? Bah! past surgery. Tell me, tell me, Captain Fanny, you'll grant my last request?"

"Yes, yes," replied Miss Fanshaw, more sympathetically than she liked it to appear before her men, for the young outlaw had been undeniably handsome, howsoever wrecked and emaciated he now appeared, and men will have their own thoughts in such a connection. "Don't try to speak any more."

"And you—you will, indeed, stand by me at the last?" persisted the moribund. "You—you will have Black Chief, my noble horse, there, too?" His dim eyes lighted up. "He

was mine once, you know, ther—ther splendid brutel!"

"Yes, yes; I have given the orders. It shall be done."

"An' the leetle gel, Captain Fanny—let her be thar, too. Promise me, promise!"

"Don't do it!" growled Diamond Dick, in an undertone, still suspicious, even while he gazed on the wasted wretch before him. "You can never be sure of anything with this sort."

She gave him a half-resentful look.

"You mean my little niece, Kitty?" she said, turning to the sufferer with no little gentleness.

"Yes, yes!" was the gasped response. "Oh, if I'd on'y knowed thet Mountain Lion Mike meant ter kerry her off—but thet's over an' done now. You—you see, Cap'n Fanny," pantingly, "I hed a leetle sister jess like thet young one once, and—and—"

"Say no more; it shall be so. Ha! look at him, Malatta! Dead or a faint?"

"A faint," was the old squaw's reply, after a brief examination; and then, without further preliminaries, the litter was taken up and its occupant carried into the open air, the attendants and onlookers following.

Before going with the rest, however, Diamond Dick exchanged a few words with Broncho Bob, Mustang Mat, Bertie, and Handsome Harry, who had been among those present at the strange scene.

The consequence was that, when all were gathered about the new-made grave on the open prairie, with the prostrate man stretched beside it, there was standing, saddled and bridled, not far away, Rocket, a powerful iron-gray stallion, generally acknowledged as the best horse at Esmeralda, with the single exception of Black Chief, which was impatiently pawing the turf at the edge of the grave, convenient for the dying man to feast his eyes thereon, Captain Fanny herself holding him by the bits, with the wondering little Kitty at her side.

Antelope Andy had managed to come out of his faint with the cool sunset blowing over him. He half-turned on his side, apparently with a very painful effort, and looked into the deep open grave that was designed to soon cover away his mortal remains, with something like a sigh of satisfaction.

"It'll be comf'table, comf'table, I reckon!" he muttered, jerkingly. And then his hollow, faded eyes lighted up with great enthusiasm, as they rested devouringly upon the magnificent steed. "Ah, ther big black, ther angel of a hoss!" he exclaimed. "No critter 'his ekal—not one, not one! Cap'n—Cap'n Fanny."

"Yes; what is it, Antelope?"

"Please order this crowd back a bit. I—

I wanter say suthin' pertic'lar, suthin' fer—fer the good o yoursels an' ther kid. See?"

She did as he requested, the onlookers, who were chiefly at his side of the grave, falling back some dozen paces at a motion of her hand.

"What is it now, Antelope Andy?" Miss Fanshaw inquired.

"This!" in a clear, ringing shout. And then he was across the grave and in the saddle with a tremendous bound. "Don't furgit ther trick, Cap'n Fan!"

In an instant he had snatched Kitty up in his arms, torn the bridle-rein from Miss Fanshaw's astounded grasp, and was off over the prairie like the wind.

Even before a pistol could be snatched out of a belt, so paralyzing was the sudden surprise—and hardly a man had thought to bring a rifle along—he was out of range, and speeding away toward the Bitter Roots like a meteor.

"Just as I feared!" thundered Diamond Dick, the first to recover his presence of mind. "Trust a Killer when you trust a rattlesnake! Quick, Bronco Bob, the stallion!" And then, shouting out a dozen instructions for his followers, and with the rapidity and snap out of a well charged gun, he sprang upon Rocket's back, and was off in pursuit.

Captain Fanny had reeled back, pale, faint, and humiliated; and not another man attempted to take up the immediate pursuit, for their leader's parting commands had expressly forbidden it, while not unmindful of future contingencies.

As for Diamond Dick, he kept steadily on, urging his iron-gray to the utmost that he could safely do, and this was a superb pace, to enable him to hold his own with the treacherous fugitive, who, with all his cunning had only managed to gain a start of less than a mile.

"Curse the dare-devil villain!" muttered Diamond Dick, though with more of impatience than anger, for the bold cunning of the ruse that had been worked so perseveringly and successfully had in some measure excited his admiration.

Bertie had hurriedly thrust a Winchester rifle into his hands at the moment of his taking horse.

Once he raised the weapon to his shoulder as he rode, and sighted a long range shot that, with his accustomed skill, could scarcely have failed to pink the fleeing horseman in the centre of the back under ordinary circumstances. But when about to pull trigger, little Kitty's head appeared looking back over her abductor's shoulder, while stretching out her hands imploringly; and uncertain

of even his iron nerve for incurring the necessary risk, he lowered the rifle with a muttered oath.

And so the mad chase continued until the rugged and wooded foot-spurs of the Bitter Roots were plainly discernible less than three miles ahead.

"Oh!" muttered Diamond Dick, "we are getting along, getting along, and far from home at that."

Then his attention was momentarily distracted by a large herd of antelope that went bounding away over the grassy sea within easy rifle shot.

Then, again continuing his steadfast gaze ahead, an exultant exclamation burst from his lips.

Black Chief was seen to stumble, almost going to his knees—perhaps from stepping in a prairie-dog hole, and before his rider could get him into anything like his former thundering pace, upward of a third of his advance start had been sacrificed.

"I've got him!" said Diamond Dick to himself. His own noble brute was letting himself out with unabated speed and energy beneath him, and with a perfect rhythm of powerful motion. "Ha! Yes, by Jupiter! there's a perceptible limp in Black Chief's running now! If I'm not positively gaining on him, may I be shot! Good boy, brave Rocket!" And he patted his horse's neck encouragingly.

If he could only have divined that he was being played with—that both stumble and limp were by design on the part of the intelligent, perfectly trained fugitive stallion, at the instance of his shrewd master!

But, then, who could have dreamed of such a thing? Not even Diamond Dick at that exciting juncture, we may be sure. And on, on they sped, pursuer and pursued, deceived and deceiver, with the first grove clumps now beginning to thicken around them in the slowly fading sunset light.

At last the fugitive disappeared into a thinly scattered grove at the base of the nearest foot-hill, and Diamond Dick was after him like a shot, less than fifty rods behind.

The latter for a moment lost sight of his man in the comparative obscurity of the wood, and then caught a glimpse of him, spurring his horse at a broad leap across a circumscribed open and grassy little glade.

Wondering why the fugitive should have put his horse to a jump just there, but supposing it to have been a mere freak of horsemanship, Diamond Dick urged his animal directly on at the same swift pacing gait that he had been for some time pursuing.

Then there was a crash—the open, grassy space had been nothing more than the

treacherous cover for a prepared pitfall—and Diamond Dick was at the bottom of a deep, narrow ravine, with his horse frantically floundering under him.

"Ha, ha, ha!" mockingly laughed the voice of the cunning outlaw. "How d'ye like ther racket so fur ez you've gone, Diamond Dick? But look out fur more ter come. Ta, ta! an' Antelope Andy's respects ter Cap'n Fanny—when you see her agin, which'll be never, never more, this side of the grave. Ha, ha, ha!"

Then, with an added plaintiff cry from poor little Kitty, there was a continuance of the hoof-beats through the wood, until they and the voice died away together.

Diamond Dick was still endeavoring to extricate himself from his maddened, but apparently not greatly injured horse, when suddenly a numerous band of mounted Killers made their appearance, looking gloatingly down on him from the edge of the ravine.

More than half their number hurriedly dismounted and precipitated themselves into the pit. In a few minutes, Diamond Dick was overpowered, bound hand and foot, and taken out, while his noble horse, Rocket, before he could be prevented, bounded away on being relieved of his rider, and disappeared with a wild sort of equine scream, down along the bed of the slowly widening ravine.

"It is Diamond Dick himself!" exclaimed the leader of the little band. "Fetch him along to the fastness. Holy smoke! Mountain Lion Mike will fairly jump out of his skin for joy when he learns of this hyar capture."

Diamond Dick was accordingly bound securely upon a spare horse and led off up into the mountains, without further ado.

He had been not a little stunned and confused by the suddenness of his unexpected fall into the ravine, so that any sort of resistance had been out of the question; and now there was nothing left for it but to bear his misfortune as philosophically as he might.

Night came down over the wooded steeps heavy and dark; but the outlaws seemed to pursue their way by the tortuous and difficult trails by a sort of instinct.

By moonrise, or perhaps ten o'clock, the fastness was reached; a wild, naturally fortified glen, apparently in the very heart of the mountains, and here, for the time being, at least, he received better treatment than he might have expected.

The Killers, it is true, came crowding angrily and menacingly around him in great numbers; but, beyond frowns and curses, they exercised no little forbearance toward him, evidently under previous instructions to that effect. And he was presently placed

under strong guard in a large old cabin, containing no other occupant, where he was temporarily relieved of his bonds, and furnished with good, freshly cooked food and pure water, of which he was in great need.

The interior of his rude prison-house was fitfully illuminated by light from the numerous campfires blazing around it, and flashing in through the open door, before which the outlaws on guard, armed to the teeth, and watchful as lynxes, passed and repassed incessantly.

Shortly after his incarceration here, the prisoner was visited by Mountain Lion Mike, the masked chieftain of the Killers of Koo-tennai.

"Diamond Dick," said this master villain, with folded arms, and in an unexpected moderation of tone, though there was the perceptible ring of exultant cruelty behind it, "you are my prisoner, and though I have not yet determined upon the means, I shall most assuredly put you to death, and in short order, as you would undoubtedly do in my case, were our positions reversed."

"Undoubtedly—or turn you over to the tender mercies of Polly Brixton's prize-fighting parent," was the prompt reply. "By the way, Mike Bradshaw, do you always go masked?"

"When it suits me, and in the presence of certain parties, yes," with equal coolness and imperturbability.

"Captain Fanny, of Esmeralda, among others, doubtless?"

The outlaw started, but recovered his composure at once, if indeed he had lost it, and made a dismissive gesture.

"So you are the renowned Diamond Dick?" he observed, with a cold sneer; "an educated man, and, therefore, doubtless, a mystery, underneath the frontier ruffianism with which you incessantly mix, doubtless for your own purposes?"

"Perhaps the same as yourself—barring the crime in which you seem to glory."

Mountain Lion Mike glared through his mask, and for the first time gave utterance to a diabolical chuckle.

"If you only knew what was in store for you!" he hissed out.

For answer, Diamond Dick threw himself wearily upon the heap of pine boughs, from which he had risen, and was soon fast asleep.

band of Killers, with the masked leader himself at their head.

The course was back and down through the mountains, and, as near as he could guess, by a somewhat different route from that by which he had been carried up into them.

Now, however, in broad daylight, and not being hoodwinked, he was enabled to make use of his eyes to the best advantage, and he did not neglect the opportunity.

At last they reached and rode out upon the grand, grassy plain, or pampas strip.

Here, at a chosen spot, the prisoner was taken from his horse, and lashed securely high up against one of the outcropping boulder-rocks, from which he had an unobstructed view over the vast grassy sea to the north.

"That will do," said Mountain Lion Mike, when these preparations were complete. "Come away, and be infernal quick about it!"

And the band rode away, without another word.

The prisoner had maintained a proud taciturnity as to what his fate was to be; but what could all this mean?

His doubts were soon dispelled.

A long, rolling line of smoke presently appeared along the northern horizon of the grassy sea, and the wind was blowing directly in his face.

The smoke-line quickly became a line of fire, an interminably advancing wave of which was rushing down upon him with the remorselessness of doom itself.

The prairie was on fire. The sea of grass was becoming a sea of flame, and it was intended that he should be engulfed amid the scorching waves.

Horror for the moment possessed the hapless captive, to the exclusion of every other thought. He strained at his bonds with superhuman strength, but in vain. The fiery billow was almost upon him. Its parching breath was in his hair; its lurid brilliancy scorched his eyes; troops of terrified wild animals of every description—deer, antelope, elk, a few buffaloes, wild mustangs, panthers, bears, wild cats, even serpents, for the most part rattlesnakes—rushed past him in inextricable panic, intent only upon outrunning that awful pursuing wave, that consuming destroyer. He alone was its hopelessly doomed victim—helpless, bound hand and foot, in its remorseless path.

The heat and glare were unendurable. In another minute the billows of flame would sweep over him. He closed his eyes—suffered and waited.

Then, what was that? A shrill feminine shout of encouragement, and the trampling of hoofs! Yes; and directly behind the rock

CHAPTER X.

THE SEA OF FIRE.

At about daybreak, Diamond Dick was rudely awakened, bound afresh upon a horse, and hurried away from the camp by a small

upon which he was bound, like another Prometheus, facing the vultures and harpies of the offended deities, save that in this instance the harpies were the innumerable flame-winged demons of devouring heat, the vultures the lurid-eyed, fire-breathed myriads of shrieking flame.

Then a swift vision of the lovely mistress of Esmeralda bending over him from her seat upon a powerful, snorting horse, the sweep of a knife, severing his bonds, and, half-running, half-borne along by clinging to the horse's mane, he was swept around behind the rock, on and away with breathless speed before the flame-crests of the on-rolling fiery sea.

"Courage, Diamond Dick, and hang on!" cried his lovely preserver. "Twenty rods further on, and we are saved—saved to life and to vengeance!"

"Think but of yourself, my friend," was the hoarse-panted reply. "To life and vengeance! There is an eternity of new strength, new hope, in mere words!"

Then a few more bounds, with the breath of the fire-wave in hot pursuit, and, leaping down a steep, ragged slope, they were comparatively safe in the slanting bottom of the zigzag ravine.

It was already crowded, it is true, with a motley throng of panic-stricken wild beasts, game and reptiles, seeking shelter there. But the human new-comers hurriedly and with perfect impunity, crashed and trampled their way through them down the deep descent to the bottom, presently coming to a pause at least a dozen feet lower than the prairie, just as the fire-billow leaped the wide space over their heads with a flash, a roar, a scorching blast, and the danger was at an end.

At this juncture there was a whinnying cry, and Rocket, the noble iron-gray, came pawing up the incline, from the direction of the foot-hills, fully caprisoned as when he escaped on the previous evening, after falling with his master into the prepared pitfall.

"Ther stallion—ther splendid roan!" cried the former, unconsciously relapsing into his frontier idiom in his excitement, and forthwith springing upon the animal's back. "Why, by Jupiter! this hyar must be ther same gulch that trapped us both back yonder in ther foot-hills."

"Very likely," replied Captain Fanny; "and where your relief party is already awaiting us; only a little deeper into the mountains at the canon opening of this very ravine. Come, they are anxiously awaiting us, for I announced your predicament to them, after discovering it with the aid of my field-glass.

And there's yet better news in store for you, Diamond Dick."

As she spoke, she led the way at a brisk pace down the gulch, a brief pause only being made somewhat further on for the purpose of slaking their thirst at an ice-cold rivulet of water that trickled down the rocky side of what had now deepened and broadened into a canon of respectable size.

"I can't imagine anything better'n what you tell me, ma'am!" exclaimed Diamond Dick. "What can it be?"

"That reserve force of your Order of the Fifty, left by you at Canyon City, with ex-Town Marshal Codger in command."

"Yes, yes."

"They arrived at Esmeralda last night, and are now, under an Indian's guide, familiar with the trails, on their way to attack the Killers in their fastness, perhaps by the same trail pursued by your captors with you last night."

"Splendid! You mean it, Captain Fan?"

"Indeed, yes. They were still threading their way down the canon. And there is more yet for you, my friend."

"What is it?"

"Your own special party are prepared to cut off the most probable line of the Killers' retreat, should they be routed, and probably up by the same trail that you were fetched along down, by Mountain Lion Mike and his band, this morning. Moreover, there are certain visitors from Canyon City with our own party, whom you may not be displeased to see."

Here a turn brought them out into the canon opening, where their friends, who were in anxious waiting for their appearance, set up a tremendous shout of greeting.

Bertie was the first to rush up and seize his father's hand; Handsome Harry followed, and then came Mr. Jeff Davis Blazer, of the "Hewgang," honest Hob Brixton, of the Coeur d'Alene Hotel, and handsome Polly—the latter closely companioned by Bronco Bob, whose broad grin of satisfaction argued well for a good understanding having been established between the pair—who were almost equally enthusiastic in their greeting; after which there was another rousing cheer of congratulation from all hands.

But these amenities consumed but a few minutes, and then Diamond Dick, having been provided with fresh weapons, was once again the stern leader and disciplinarian.

"To horse, every man of you!" he cried, in his clear, commanding tones. "No time is to be lost, if we are to intercept the Killers by the trail Captain Fanny has told me of, and which, fortunately, I am familiar with, having traversed it only this morning, with

my eyes open. That's the talk!" as the cavalcade put itself in motion; "and forward's the word!"

Winding out of the canon, in less than half an hour they reached the foot of the required trail; and then, climbing it to a certain chosen spot, they formed an ambuscade about midway to the robber fastness, and waited.

In a short time a sudden din of shots and cries, from far away up in the mountains, told of the attack being made upon the outlaw camp.

The latter must have been completely surprised and panic-stricken, for, twenty minutes later the Killers, to the number of thirty or forty, on horse and on foot, came hurrying down the trail, by which they doubtless felt sure of escaping out over the burnt-over llanos to some other fastness that they knew of to the north or west. They were instantly met by a deadly fire from the ambuscaded, and, as they broke and fled in every direction, the majority of the posse were speedily up and after them in hot pursuit.

But both Diamond Dick and Captain Fanny were chiefly concerned at the moment for the safety of the child Kitty.

They were accordingly spurring straight up the trail, followed by two or three others, when, at a difficult turn, they were so fortunate as to meet Mountain Lion Mike himself—masked, of course—who was thundering down upon them, mounted on a white mustang. He was closely followed by George Carbury and Antelope Andy, likewise well mounted, the former with the little girl in his arms.

Furious at the recollection of his wrongs, and with scarcely an instant's thought, Diamond Dick, who was a little in advance of his companion, threw his Winchester to his shoulder and fired two shots in such rapid succession that they seemed to have hardly more than one report.

Both counted. Mountain Lion Mike's horse, slightly rearing at the critical instant, plunged forward, shot through the brain, and throwing his masked rider so heavily that he lay stunned and insensible in the trail. Carbury, with a single cry, rolled out of the saddle, dead with a bullet in his heart, while Kitty, uninjured, rushed with a glad burst of tears into the arms that her aunt stretched down over the saddle-bow for her reception. While Antelope Andy, leaping from his broncho without a word, dashed off to one side through the underbrush, and made his escape.

CHAPTER XI.

CONCLUSION.

Diamond Dick and Captain Fanny had quickly dismounted, whereupon the former had summarily removed the mask from the insensible outlaw leader's face—thereby revealing not uncomely, and even eminently handsome features, but so written over with stormy passion and crime as to be grim and forbidding, even in unconsciousness.

On beholding them, the Mistress of Esmeralda started back in much agitation.

"Had you never seen him before?" sternly demanded Diamond Dick, regarding her with a fixed and searching look.

"Not for a long time—not for years," she stammered, though slowly struggling back to her self-possession. "Oh, my God!"

But to Polly Brixton, at least, who now came hurrying upon the scene, with her father and several others, the features of the insensible outlaw were positively no stranger.

"That same villainous 'ound as hinsulted me!" she cried, her black eyes snapping venomously. "'Ere, pop, bring 'im around with a dash o' cold water, an' then 'ammer, 'ammer, 'ammer the 'ole hupholstery hout o' 'im as you know how! I want to see you do it!"

"No, it won't do; stand back, if you please, Miss Brixton!" sternly interposed Diamond Dick, who had exchanged a few whispered words with Captain Fanny. "I understand, then," turning to the latter, "that you will hold yourself responsible for this man being given up to justice on demand?"

"I will," replied Miss Fanshaw, in a scarcely audible voice, and, some of her own men coming up at this moment, the outlaw leader was forthwith restored to consciousness, securely bound, and given over to their custody, much to Polly Brixton's disgust, though her worthy father seemed to take a much more philosophical view of it.

The ambuscaders now came straggling in from the pursuit, and were presently joined by the attacking party from further up into the mountains, under Codger's command.

The victory over the Killers of Kootenai was fairly complete, with the destruction of perhaps half their organization, and the remainder scattered as panic-stricken fugitives to the four winds. Though this was not as satisfactory as the extermination of the entire band would have been, it was still very creditable on the part of the Order of the Fifty, especially as it was supremely unlikely that they would ever muster again as an organ-

ized body, at least in that section, and the community would thus be enabled to breathe freely once more.

But as to this last, there is a parting episode, the brief relation of which must bring our present story to a close, though there may be more to come, in the way of finally explaining what is not yet fully clear, at some future day.

On the evening of that same day at Esmeralda, Diamond Dick strode away from a small cabin, in which Mountain Lion Mike had been confined under a strong guard, and, making his way through crowds of muttering, frowning, and more or less infuriated men, sought the presence of Captain Fanny, whom he found alone in one of her favorite rooms.

She looked up with misgiving, for his face was sterner than she had ever seen it before, and yet with something else in its frowning lineaments which she could not divine.

"I have been on a visit to Mountain Lion Mike's prison," he said, abruptly, even harshly.

Miss Fanshaw paled visibly, but only slightly inclined her head.

"I didn't intend to burn him to death, though the villain might well have merited such a sentence by the code of *lex talionis*," he continued, in the same tone. "No—I merely meant to hand him over to our men, to be hanged like a dog."

She still made no answer, not even by a nod, and her eyes were fastened upon his with something imploring in them.

"I found the prison," he went on, "but not the prisoner. He had escaped. Miss Fanshaw," with sudden suppressed fury, "this was your doing—by your design! I have investigated the whole matter—how the guards were ordered away by you—how the horse was furnished—everything! Deny it, if you can!"

"I cannot—I dare not!" she cried, springing up, and rushing to him with clasped hands. "It is true, true, true! Oh, my friend—Diamond Dick!" with an agony of appeal, "forgive me! That man—that man——"

"Well?" impatiently.

Her head sank upon her breast, which was rising and falling as if with a storm of suppressed sobs.

"Was my husband, in the old and happier days!" faintly; "and—I—I still love him," half-sobbingly; "for, strive as I will, I cannot yet wholly tear him from my heart!"

A slight, but very slight, softening came into Diamond Dick's hard face. Much that had been inexplicable in this beautiful woman's strange character was becoming clearer now.

"A villain, crime-stained to the core!" he exclaimed. "A villain, who will reorganize his accursed band at the first opportunity!"

"No, no, no!" vehemently. "He swore to me that he would not, swore it by our former love, and—and——"

"And you believed him?"

"Yes, yes; but I know that he will keep his oath—I know it—feel it!"

"Pshaw! Listen to the hoots and groans of that mob of men outside—brave wolves, cheated of their just prey!"

"I care naught for them—a word from my lips, a wave of my white hand, will suffice to make my peace with them. But, oh, my friend!" wildly, and again clasping her hands, "it is your forgiveness, yours alone, that I crave. Say that you give it to me, only say it, Diamond Dick!"

He drew a long breath. Why should he not grant her the forgiveness she begged? His mission to Esmeralda was triumphantly ended and achieved, apart from all consideration of the single master-desperado who had been permitted to escape living from his clutch. However, as another thought suddenly crossed his brain, his unforgiving sternness returned to him, at least temporarily.

"On one condition I will," he said at last.

"Name it!" eagerly.

"Explain to me, with your past history, that clover mark on your shoulder, such as I might bear in mind."

"Alas!" wringing her hands, "I cannot—must not."

"Ha!"

"Give me time, then!" imploringly. "Then at some other time, some future——"

"Time!" angrily. "Woman, whatever may be the secret that links us in the past, your past has not been stainless, then—not such as you would dare recount it to me?"

"Indeed, indeed, you wrong me!" wildly; "and yet—and yet—oh, my friend, if you but knew all! My life, it may have been as wayward and wandering as your own, but never, never guilt-stained, on my honor! Oh, do not, do not press me further, now!"

Here there was a rushing of steps in the adjoining passage, and little Kitty, hurrying into the room, ran first to her aunt, and then to Diamond Dick.

"Oh!" cried the child, "the men are so furious out of doors. And all because that big robber has escaped, instead of being hanged by them. I have told them they ought to be ashamed of themselves, for enough robbers have been killed already, and it is wicked to kill so many. Come and tell them/so yourself, aunt. And you, too, Diamond Dick!" hugging at one of his knotted hands. "Come! Ain't my wicked uncle killed,

and am I not safe at last? What more can they want? Come, and make them go away!"

Diamond Dick's face suddenly relaxed, and, clasping the child to his breast, he extended his hand to Miss Fanshaw, who eagerly grasped it.

"Good!" he said, in an altered voice. "The child is right. Diamond Dick's drag-net will not be likely soon to be forgotten by those rascals; and who knows what revelation the future may have in store for us? Come, Captain Fanny; let us take Kitty's advice and devise means to appease the wrath of those impatient and disappointed fellows in the corals. We ought to manage it between us, and after that it shall be our aim for new life and new adventures in new scenes. Come!"

"God bless you, Diamond Dick!" exclaimed the Lady of Esmeralda, fervently.

And they did manage it, too, though it proved a somewhat more difficult matter than they anticipated; and the Killers of Kootenai were never again the terror of the Bitter Root Mountains; and such was

(The End.)

The next number of the Diamond Dick, Jr., will contain "Diamond Dick, Jr., and the Bar-20 Brand; or, The Shindy at Samarang," by W. B. Lawson.

APPLAUSE.

I have been reading your Diamond Dick, Jr., Weekly since 1896, in the old library when Keron Kate was with Bertie, up to the present number, and I must say that Bertie is all right and the old Serpent is out of sight. Wishing them all a long life, I remain their constant reader,

JOHN PRIOR,
Clarksburg, W. Va.

We are pleased to have such pleasant words from an old friend. Thank you.

Seeing from the Diamond Dick, Jr., Weekly that you wish the criticisms of your readers, we take great pleasure in stating that we think the above weekly the best of its kind ever published. We greatly admire Bertie and Handsome Harry.

Unlike the gentleman whose letter you published last week, we think that to have Bertie wear his hair short and put aside his unique attire would spoil everything.

Eight Boys of Tallahassee (per G. R. B.),
Tallahassee, Fla.

We agree with you that Bertie's attire is the best adapted to his present surroundings.

Thanks for your words of praise.

As you wanted your readers to write you what they think of the Diamond Dick, Jr., books, I send in this letter. I have read many different kinds of books, but never have I found any equal

to these Diamond Dick, Jr. I have read it only about six months, but that is as long as I need to make up my mind that it is the best story book the market carries to-day. I mean to read them right along, and I would invite all boys that like good reading to get Diamond Dick, Jr., by all means.

W. E. BRADBURY,
East Hebron, Me.

We are glad that your experience with the Diamond Dick, Jr., Weekly has been such a pleasant one. Your remarks as to its entertaining capacity are just and true.

Having read your request for the opinion of the readers of the Diamond Dick, Jr., Weekly, I take pleasure in giving my opinion. I think as much of the two boys as I do of Bertie. I have read nearly every number from 32 to the present date. Is the name Diamond taken from the diamonds he wears, and Dick taken from Richard, making the name Diamond Dick? Hoping to hear more of Bertie's father and wishing you success, I remain,

E. A. M.,
Holyoke, Mass.

The origin of the name is that which you suggest. Thank you for your kind words and good wishes.

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